

A close-up, low-angle shot of the front left side of an old, weathered car. The car's paint is peeling and rusted, with visible orange and red rust. A round headlight is mounted on the fender, and a circular emblem or hubcap is visible on the adjacent fender. The background is a clear blue sky with some bare trees.

The Broad River Review

THE
BROAD RIVER
REVIEW

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GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY
BOILING SPRINGS, NORTH CAROLINA

The staff and friends of *The Broad River Review* would like to offer our sincerest appreciation to Dr. Joyce Compton Brown for her years of valued service.

As Faculty Editor, contributor, and trusted advisor, Dr. Brown has been a steady and guiding force for most of *The Broad River Review's* existence (formerly known as *Reflections*).

Her love of literature and imaginative writing has been instrumental to the enduring success of the Department of English and, especially, our literary magazine.

We dedicate this issue of *The Broad River Review* to
Dr. Joyce Compton Brown.

THE
BROAD RIVER
REVIEW

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CONTENTS

SPECIAL AWARDS

The Broad River Review Student Poetry Award

Summer Hess 6 *Effects*

The Broad River Review Student Fiction Award

Scott Holstein 7 *The Returned*

J. Calvin Koontz Poetry Award

Nicole Hemric 12 *Bittersweet Cacophony*
13 *The Words*

POETRY

Joyce Compton Brown	14	<i>Vigil</i>
	15	<i>Impllosion</i>
	16	<i>Parade</i>
	17	<i>Eulogy</i>
	18	<i>Mill-town Sunday</i>
	19	<i>The Finding</i>
Amanda Wood	34	<i>Jericho</i>
	35	<i>Homeplace</i>
Virginia Chase Sutton	36	<i>Yellow Rind, Sour Fruit</i>
Lydia Johnson	38	<i>Home Movie Montage</i>
Nisreen Abu Ata	47	<i>The Sound of a Bullet</i>
	48	<i>My Grandma Im Saleem</i>
Brian Williams	49	<i>Devil</i>
Meg Elliot	50	<i>Refuge</i>
Stephen Roger Powers	59	<i>Cleoparton</i>
Robin Holley	60	<i>For Kristina</i>
	62	<i>Speak Now</i>
Joanna Wallace	63	<i>Blue Doors</i>
Audrey Friedman	64	<i>At My Easel</i>
Juli Conner	65	<i>The Lemming</i>
Frank Newton	66	<i>Preserver</i>

David Wayne Hampton	70	<i>Before It Passes</i>
	71	<i>Illumination, To Everything Turn</i>
Paula Galloway	72	<i>One Last Word In</i>
Kirsten Hemmy	73	<i>Sahara</i>
	74	<i>My Grandfather Tells Me a Story About His Life</i>
Jess Snyder	75	<i>The Potter</i>
	77	<i>Conundrum</i>
Brandon Coy	85	<i>Poem Town</i>
Cheryl Floyd-Miller	86	<i>Clearance</i>
Amy Unsworth	87	<i>Farm Field Trip</i>
	88	<i>Roughhousing After News of Another Abduction</i>
Betsy Humphreys	89	<i>Perfect Crime</i>
Summer Hess	90	<i>Restoration Project</i>
G.S. Aycock	92	<i>Odes to be Written</i>
Jane L. Pease	94	<i>Sunrise</i>

FICTION

Donna D. Vitucci	20	<i>Sleepwalker</i>
Natalie Murphy	40	<i>Russian Roulette</i>
Larry Rogers	67	<i>The Clock</i>

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Joyce Daniels	53	<i>Chicken Killing Day</i>
Nicole Hemric	80	<i>God in the Pines</i>
Stephanie Faile	95	<i>Of Cookies and Rocks</i>

Effects

Your presence is a cradle
that sways and rocks and leans me back,
soft like your argyle sweater and old like the wisdom of your eyes,
where hints of laughter's tiny canyons tease the corners.

I focus on the gentle similitude that has knitted our pieces of
pieces together.

Never could a garment so carefully mis-sized be mass-produced.
This garment, the hemming of our decisions and misperceptions,
hangs on a pendulum's thread.

Here is my greatest fear: that
I have to swallow pieces of myself in order to keep our nearness—
The calico patch, the sky corduroy blue, the amazon green and
blood singed red,
All shapes of past and present,
all regardless of time,
all mean something I cannot revise.

The Returned

The blue hue of the lake glistened through the trees as though the sky were draped down to the ground in front of us as we crested the knoll and came to a stop.

“Beautiful,” I whispered, trying not to dwell on the topic at hand. The car was silent; our boys were still asleep in the back. Without saying a word, Evan got out of the car, leaving his door open, and paused for a moment in front of the old cabin to take it all in. It was in shambles. The roof was covered in rotting leaves and the porch leaned as though a good shove would bring it crashing down. One of the front windows was broken, the shattered glass long since gone. The sign was still hanging, though, grimy but legible. It read “Adventure Outfitters” and had a faded painting of a rainbow trout leaping out of some unnamed stream.

Evan hobbled up the steps and across the porch. The wooden planks creaked and bent under him. He stepped up to the door, and I could see his shoulders hunker forward and his tall frame shake for a moment as he leaned on his cane. Then he straightened up, took a deep breath, and opened the rusty lock. He swung the door open wide and disappeared into the darkness inside.

Today was the 10th anniversary. He doesn’t talk about that trip. Not ever. But, he knew it was time to pay a visit to his past. I insisted on coming, for support more than anything.

Evan and Sam had owned the Outfitter store together. They would take guests to remote places in these Catskills to fish or hunt or just to hike. Every once in a while when someone wanted to go to a hard to reach place or a location outside of NY, Evan and Sam would call in their old friend Dan. He was a pilot in the Buffalo area and owned his own seaplane. Usually when they called him, their party was heading somewhere in the Canadian Wilderness in search of trophy steelheads or large game. Once a year they would all get together for their high-school gang outing. They would go off into the wilderness somewhere, far from any sign of civilization.

Jake would always make it back for those trips. It had become such a tradition over the years that the Geographic knew to not even attempt to give him an assignment during the first two weeks of April. He was a world-renowned photographer to the point where he worked when he wanted to and climbed mountains when he didn't.

I can only imagine what they must have been like together in high school. Dan was always antsy and excitable. He was never calm, or quiet. Jake was short like Dan, but had broader shoulders. He was normally quiet, but had a deep ornery streak, like a Billy goat. Sam was the humorous one of the group. He always wore a smile and constantly had to brush his dark hair out of his radiant eyes.

And Evan...well Evan was Evan. The past ten years he's been quiet, serious. When they were together, though, he was like a little kid. He had always been lighthearted, fun loving, up until that point. His laid back personality is what drew me to him so much when we were dating. I always loved to hang out with Evan and Sam at the store and listen to their tall tales of growing up together.

Evan changed on that ill-fated trip, though. He wasn't my Evan when he came back. It was as though there was some ungodly weight on his shoulders that he could not possibly uphold, and it was crushing him. He closed the shop and got a desk job in the city. His dreams dimmed, overwhelmed from grief like the sun overwhelms the stars in the sky.

I don't know every detail as to what happened out there on that last trip. We had to pry to get anything out of him while he was still in the hospital, and he would never speak about it after that. See, Evan was the only one to make it back alive.

After a round of hugs and laughter on the dock down at the lake, they had headed towards northern Canada in Dan's sea plane. No man's land.

The plane went down sometime during the night in a violent storm. Lightening destroyed the whole right wing. Those moments before the crash must have been horrifying, the engine screaming with excessive RPM's, smoke filling the cabin, burning in their lungs as they gasp for breath, gear tumbling across them over and over as they spiraled down to earth like a bird shot out of the sky.

They crash-landed at the top of some snowy peak. The

plane slid a couple hundred yards before coming to a rest. Jake and Sam came out rather unscathed, except for a few scratches and bruises. Evan had a broken leg. Dan was slumped over in the cockpit, his face red with blood, which was pooling down around his feet. His head had smashed into the dash on impact, killing him.

If they had followed proper procedure and filed a flight log, they would have just had to survive the cold and wait for a rescue party to find them. Unfortunately, the FAA didn't know where they were going, or even that they were going, and the lightening had fried all electronic equipment in the plane.

Their only option was to hoof it out. They buried Dan in the snow by his plane, pained by his loss but thankful for their own survival. They set Evan's leg with a splint, and then they made a sled for him out of a piece of the wreckage to make it easier to drag him through the snow. Jake and Sam gathered up what gear they could find and headed out, both taking turns dragging Evan along with them.

If it hadn't been for Jake's climbing gear they would have never made it off the mountain. The slope turned to a rocky drop-off that they had to repel down. They stuffed Evan in a sleeping bag and tied a makeshift harness around his chest. Then they tied him off between the two of them and Jake started down the cliff first.

Everything was working well until they dropped off over a lip partway down, leaving all three of them hanging out from the rock face as they eased themselves down. Suddenly, while they were all hanging there, a cam pulled out above them, dropping them a few feet before the next cam caught them. Then it started slipping, too. They were hanging there, helpless, unable to reach the rock face to cling to. The cam slipped some more before breaking free, dropping them again. One cam left. Another jolt told them it was slipping, too. Jake desperately tried to swing himself towards the rock face, stretching out his arm as far as he could. He couldn't reach.

"It's going!" Sam had yelled down. Jake knew there was only one option if any of them were going to make it off the mountain. There was no need for all three of them to fall to their deaths. He looked up to Evan and Sam.

"Keep the sun on your backs, boys!" he yelled with that dry grin as he reached above himself and cut the rope.

"Nooo!" Evan screamed, closing his eyes tight to block

out the image below him. Sam buried his head in his hands and sobbed.

They were safe. The cam could hold the two of them. Somehow Sam had been able to single handedly lower them off the cliff. Both of them were silent all the way down. At the bottom Sam buried another one of their friends.

Sam had to make a stretcher for Evan since they were then below the snowy peaks, and he dragged Evan through the rugged forest. It must have been hard for Sam because Evan weighed a good 40lbs more than him. He struggled and continued on, though, without a complaint, while Evan also silently suffered from the pain.

Evan didn't know how many days they had traveled. He remembered eating beans over and over; it was the only food from their packs that Sam had found left in the plane wreckage. They traveled through mountainous terrain, down to the lower elevation, dominated by the coniferous forest. It was a beautiful Hell.

Ill fate soon struck again a few days into the journey while Sam was struggling to pull Evan and his stretcher over some fallen timber. Sam stepped backwards over a log and suddenly dropped the stretcher, screaming out in pain. Evan winced as he fell to the ground. Sam had unwittingly stepped on a rattler.

“Damn!” he cursed. He quickly tied a tourniquet below his knee. Evan looked up in amazement as Sam walked over to him, pale-faced, and began to drag him again.

“Sam, you’ve got to keep your blood circulation down, or the venom will reach your heart!” Evan had protested. Sam ignored him and kept going, convinced they were near civilization. Half an hour later Sam collapsed onto his knees, holding his chest and wheezing. His leg was dark purple and swollen. Slowly the venom stopped his heart, and Evan was left alone.

Evan cried all night after Sam died. His loss hit Evan the hardest. The next day he started crawling, with a sheer determination to live. He crawled, inch by inch, day and night, his rotting, useless leg dragging behind him.

The hikers found Evan beside a trail, five miles from Sam’s body. He was dehydrated and bloody, his fingers worn raw.

I slipped out of the car and walked up to the cabin. Evan had been gone a long time. I creaked across the porch and peaked inside. It took my eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. Then I saw him. He was backed against the wall, sitting on the dusty

floor. He was weeping onto a photo in his hands. I stood still to not interrupt him, but he noticed me in the doorway. He wiped his face, but didn't look at me.

"Melissa...why was I spared?" he whimpered. "How can I possibly live a life that makes their sacrifices worthwhile?"

I didn't know what to say so I walked over to him, past the counter where I had sat years before, around the worn card table, and across the empty floor where outdoor equipment was once displayed, each item decorated in advertisements spouting claims of superiority, and I knelt down to Evan and held him close.

He eventually stood up, tears streaming down the weathered wrinkles in his cheeks like the mountains' rivers he used to tame. Embracing each other, we slowly walked back to the car. When he saw our boys looking out the window at us, his face softened.

"Daddy, what's the matter?" our youngest son asked as we got in. Evan sat silently for a few moments, staring down at the lake.

"Boys, it's time I told you about the men you are named after," he said, the blue hue of the lake reflecting in his eyes, warming their cool grayness.

Bittersweet Cacophony

Sweetness can rot your teeth.
Bitterness lingers longest on the tongue.

Candy coated words are hardest to swallow.
Promises made in the dark should be kept in the sight of the sun.

Sour looks stick to your face forever.
Memories can sweeten tears, or kill a smile.

Forbidden fruit today is tossed out with tomorrow's garbage.
A stroke of luck tarnishes like unkempt silver.

An innocent kiss can break a heart in two.
The strongest will die with the weakest to hold them.

The Words

They haunt me, like ghosts of the forgotten who try to reach out and touch someone—anyone—never be silenced. Memories dance across the white ceiling that stares back, down at me as I lie awake watching a sad play performed by shadows, blurred by a watery curtain extending down my cheek. Numb, my hand will find its way to the edge of the mattress and dangle as closely as possible to the floor.

My fingers, spindly roots that claw and clamour their way down into the dirt, sucking out the earth's marrow and blood. The play is over. My fingers retract. I think of books I've read, movies I've seen, and all the characters I emulate in my life. I wonder, has anyone has been clever enough to check the programs and see that there is but one actress and many roles. I think of God, and ask the spirits standing by the door what it's like to be dead.

I watch, as my ceiling becomes a creamy white vortex, swirling into an open space where heaven and earth connect over my tired form. I float just close enough to catch a tiny glimpse of what can only be described as somewhere, but not anywhere here. An ocular illusion—brought on by reading too long nights by a too dim bulb and pounding keys to make worlds appear on a glowing white square,

framed in the blackness of the words.

Vigil

She sings her mother's song of sorrow
With the pain of her own life added for edge
Lifting her voice in translucent innocence.

Keening for the wayworn traveler,
For the way worn travelers of yesterday and tomorrow
That deliverance will come.

Child of God awaiting palms of victory
Daughter of hope wringing out despair
Descendent of dreamers singing eternity.
That voice must have wept at the Tomb.

(1977)

Impllosion

Junaluska,

Honorary citizen of your native land,
Battered old man with obsidian eyes,
 black eyes blaring the last and silent cry
 against the loss of life
 against the loss of will.

When the palid photographer retreated
 under his black hood, did he
 tremble at the truth he saw?

As I now sicken from the refracted power
 of a bundled old man
 on a straightback chair
 in front of a cabin
 provided by
 the State
 which cut a red and muddy
 streak across your Snowbirds

and now provides a plaque
 marking the grave
 of the last great
 Cherokee warrior.

(1978)

Parade

A diesel truck moves
through the street
in low-geared solemnity

Bearing on its flat-bed stage
a Christmas vision from
Rita's School of Dance:

Joseph and Mary cringe within the crèche
before the electric thud and crash
of rock and roll.

A stereophonic Star
croones, "Beat it,"
to fiberglass baby Jesus

who
does not awaken
does not obey
does not cry out at flashing feet
above the Lamb.

(1984)

Eulogy

He spat out desperate little words
against the finitude of human understanding.

He spoke of the awesome gap
between theology and science,
between heaven and hell.

He asked us to peer into the darkness
of our innermost secret sinful hearts

Where I saw a gentle bearded man
gliding his canoe among cypress knees
under circling ospreys
through still, polished waters

Teaching a child the miracle
of lily pads
of golden club
of old man's beard
and alligator smiles.

(1984)

Mill-town Sunday

We ride oiled clay roads
Past the rusty combine and Mitch Jordan's hog pen
blooming with hollyhocks,
Past sorrel and chickweed
pushing through garden remnants of cotton farms,
To our usual graveled space.

In our stiff Sunday cotton dresses and French heels
we walk the hot, mud-streaked sidewalk into church,
Into cool quiet, into transformation.

Arching windows overpower reality,
diffusing by the beauty of their light.
The sanctuary glows with old familiar stories,
with holiness and order and truth beyond time.
We are surrounded by Moses and Joseph and the Good Samaritan;
the boy Jesus in the temple, Mary and the empty tomb.

The light shines through Christ in the Garden.
His stained glass white and crimson robes
glow with morning sun.
His praying face turns toward blue cobalt lead-fringed sky.
Our faces lift toward radiant Jesus,
Serene in the beauty of ceremony.

In a long low building
rows of steel machines with sharp slit-eyed needles
threaded and poised
wait in the vast dark silence.

Today their drone is deadened by the mighty roar of Bach.
Backs and fingers and weary eyes
yield to liturgy's demands.
Voices of praise rise in dignity.

(1989)

*The Finding
(for James Still)*

I have come at last to the place I know.
Not the place my mother knew by my place still.
I know why the ant husk hangs by a thread on my clothesline.
I know when the katydids will sing in the harmony of
pulsing shrills.

I fear the drought that sucks the water from my well
And listen for the throbbing sound of pilated woodpecker
pounding on hollow tree.
I know the slippery rocks of algae-wet and the burning rocks of
summer's glare.
And I know the deer's brown eyes and the sting of cat briers.

I see bear-claws clutching sunflower feeders
And the endless patience of wasps to build and build again.
I take my garbage to the tree's feet beside the
deep green galax.
I watch brown grasshoppers lunge zig and zag against
the roar of machine.

I walk in a place where dry leaves fall and dark holes
harbor the timber rattler.
I stand beside the yellow pines that cling to the
thin-soiled rock.
There is a room for me in the clear still waters touched
by water striders and crayfish
In the presence of the patterned glow of
the striped water snake.

(2002)

Sleepwalker

Nothing tainted in the way, as a boy, I stood more partner than son for my mama, and Daddy more houseguest than head of the family. No fault of hers nor mine that he'd appear intermittently, smoking on the front porch step, or tilted on a kitchen chair, balancing his edgy, about-to-bolt weight. Barely hello, and he'd be squinting through the Winston's exhaust, already eyeing the door. Because his absence bent our lives into such shapes, Mama counted on me — small boy, going nowhere — to define what was dependable about her world.

My daddy's wanderlust shot holes through us from the start. We knew there was no changing him and so none of us much tried, and yet he was the artery from where each family member branched, letting our blood, and his blood, every little bit along the road. Granma Bristol and her brother, Uncle Joel, matched Mama's and my twosome, kept things nailed down proper. We slammed our four weights to the far corners of the house and managed to hole up there when we had to, against the river or whatever else rose and set us to treading water.

Miamitown was nothing more than a pull-off following the river from Cincinnati to Aurora, a strip of gun and bait shops, a pocket of antique stores and a diner, two gas stations, Mobil and Shell, that undercut each other's prices in summers, an auto body shop, and churches cast a bit further from the main drag, Route 128, our street address. I know now you couldn't blame Daddy itching for more, but back then I thought the one world that mattered was lapped by the Great Miami, with its shoals and its whitewater, slipping on down from our feet to meet the Ohio in North Bend. And over the bridge there to Taylor's Creek and the Gymkhana Club where horses showed most weekends. Sally Ann Dowling loved horses; well what girl doesn't? She haunted the stalls Saturday morning to Sunday night in summer, pestering the handlers to let her brush their animals. Any one she got to shone silky from her attentions, their manes as smooth as Sally Ann's own straw-colored hair. I know because Sally Ann's devotions gave me cause to haunt the place, too.

On the other side of Harrison Pike set the driving range and the chili parlor and a neighborhood landmark still active today — Sinclair's Lounge. Grandma called Sinclair's a den of iniquity, proclamation which sent me to the dictionary; meaning wickedness, sin, the soul's slippery slope. Dark and confusing and succulent as the densest jungle.

The winter I turned fourteen, snow began falling in November and set on the ground for five weeks straight. It melted some and then froze, got rained on and ebbed into a dingy white more likely in late February. By the time we sat to supper the gray horizon tinged pink with the sleet that was often driving toward us, readying another coat of slick. Fickle temperatures sandwiched fog between sky and shrinking snow, and that's where Mama found me one midnight, wandering, but not aware. Asleep, I'd pulled on beaten up shoes with no socks, so the loose material scraping my insteps became part of the irritating dream I'd been trapped in for months, a dream of my daddy going up in smoke.

Mama's pointer finger in the small of my back urged me to the house, her other arm latched on mine, tableau of blind leading the blind, as I woke slowly through the very act of walking. I smelled the sleep on Mama's skin and the tang of cold weather that drifted up from the river. Both were a comfort to me, walking in the shivery outside with no memory of intent, decision, or process.

“Where's your coat?” I said.

She said, “Where's yours?”

We were the sorry pair Daddy left off and on, and she and I'd been coasting through his absences, teaching each other how to be mother, how to be son, and learning despite ourselves and our hopefulness how best to stave off a chill.

“Sleepwalking's a kind of gift, Quinn,” Mama claimed. “You leave not just your bed but your body, maybe to appear like Jesus in two places at once.”

“What's the good in that?” I said. Still foggy in the head, I couldn't see what she was getting at.

She was part time church go-er, who turned to the Lord mostly out of fear for my dad and all the other buzzheads herded down the chute into Vietnam like dumb-shit cattle — Daddy's first legitimate reason for not turning up.

Back inside the kitchen, the radio on the counter predicted sleet, the weatherman's voice crackling a sign we were out of his

range. Uncle Joel stood at the stove, boiling up leftover coffee from earlier in the day. Following my sleepwalking, all our coldest parts needed warming. I sat with Mama and Granma and waited. Our hands folded on the tabletop that way, we might as well have been praying.

“I’m depending on nature to tell of Daddy’s well-being,” Mama said.

Granma averted her eyes and said, “So, Breda, then what’s this sleet mean?” The old woman had a sarcastic streak she let fly, particularly at her only daughter.

“Same as when Derek was stateside, he found it difficult staying rooted.” Uncle Joel scraped a spoon against the bottom of the saucepan.

“You all keep your eyes open still,” Mama said.

They allowed so much because she was their pet.

I had no speculations of my own. Storm or fair skies, neither had ever brought Daddy home to us. His arrival was always surprise, always his schedule, his whim.

Granma Bristol latched onto my sleepwalking to divert all our uncertainties. “Urge to roam at Quinn’s age is grounded in devilish urges,” she said. “Preamble of what all’s to come.”

What was to come: tougher skin where whiskers sprouted, a voice that croaked when I least expected or wanted it, the love ‘em and leave ‘em attitude Uncle Joel talked big of. Back then, growing pains needled my thighs on nights I had trouble coaxing sleep into staying. And when I did sleep, I dreamt I was an orphan bird in a nest set on by magpies, or that particular night’s absorption where I was moving way too slowly to save my daddy from fire. With the weighted chains locked on my arms and legs like Marley’s Ghost, Daddy would be a burnt up stick before I’d make it to him. And meanwhile I could smell his hair burning, his beard and his furry forearms.

I remembered curling up as a small boy beside my daddy, the man in nothing but boxers, after Mama’d gone into the kitchen to start the bacon of a Sunday morning. Burrowing into Daddy, my pudgy knees and thighs in the warmth behind his bent knees, my breath drawing in and puffing out at the dark curls low on his back, it was like bedding down with an animal. He’d pretend sleep, and I’d exaggerate my fake snoring until he flipped me over onto his front side and we started wrestling.

Granma called from the kitchen, "Quit that wrasslin', Derek. You'll hurt the boy."

"I won't never," he called out. He lifted my head by my mop of hair to put us nose to nose, so close he drove me cross-eyed. Tenderly he did this, and said to me, "You know that, Quinn, right?"

"Well, then you'll break the bed," Granma said. She didn't like contradiction, but she did like my daddy.

I was surrounded on all sides by rough-edged affection.

When Mama said the bacon was ready and come eat while the fat still had sizzle on it, Daddy up and raced me to the finish line prize, which wasn't breakfast, but Mama. She and Daddy were sloppy in their kissing, oblivious to Granma nudging at them with a wet dish rag as she wiped down the stove, mindless of Uncle Joel already at the crispiest, choicest bacon. I hugged my parents' four legs down there at knee level until they shook me off and Granma took charge of settling me on the stacked phone books.

My mouth watered at that first taste of burnt meat.

"Sweet, huh?" Uncle Joel elbowed me and my plate and made my cup of milk shiver. His cigarette stained fingers matched the wood color of our kitchen table.

I nodded, chewing loudly to concur. I meant for my sideways frown to warn him about my shaky milk, but his attention was all bound up in the spectacle of Daddy nuzzling Mama by the percolator and Mama pretending struggle, just like me and Daddy wrestling. She shrieked, "Someone! Save me from this ravishing." Her teeth, her lips, and her laugh shot light to zinging off our shoulders and ricocheting around that room as Gran ripped the window shade up. Her every act was an abrupt punctuation.

This was one shining memory beside dozens of leaden moments where we prayed Daddy was okay, wondered where he was, and held our breath hoping he'd bust back through our warped kitchen door, rattling the flimsy shade with his stumble, his stubble, and his whistle.

Mama set the army's letter to the gas flame on the stove directly after reading it. Granma, Uncle Joel, and I were there in the kitchen, too, scrabbling together lunch. Granma's never-be-still fingers paused between Wonder Bread and Velveeta. Uncle Joel's sandwich was half cut, his knife halted its sawing. I stood with the refrigerator door wide open, and for once no one yelled, "Shut it!"

The cold milk bottle turned slippery in my grip. Mama's hands could have been shaking because of fire closing in on her fingers. We watched her drop the flaming thing in the sink and run the faucet to keep the charred bits from flying around the room.

"Your daddy's gone missing," she said, her words all a-chatter. She bit her lip, set a fist over her mouth, put her teeth into it. She left water pounding in the basin and wrapped her arms about herself.

This missing was different from the kinds we'd attributed to Daddy up till then. Before this we'd been able to blame him, everything had been his fault.

We each fastened our eyes on kitchen objects —mine settled on the wall thermometer—so visions wouldn't shift up and see the bland alarm spreading across the others' faces. No one spoke and I thought that was good because words would harden the bad news sliding its sick gelatin over us. Mama sat right down on the floor. Four empty chairs made the table look wholeheartedly lonely.

Granma pulled Mama up from the heap she was in, pressed her to her bosom and smoothed her hair, though Mama's hair was never out of place. The kitchen smelled like doused campfire.

"They'll continue searching," Uncle Joel said. He walked two steps, I thought to shut the water down, but his hand turned the stream red and then I saw how his sandwich had been marked with blood.

"How do you know?" I said.

"I've served." Uncle Joel sounded indignant.

Another fact I didn't know.

My aching fingers dropped the bottle and I became the center of spilled milk, shattered glass, like one of those spin paintings they taught us to make in grade school art. The world of the kitchen swirled around me, out from me, I was the fulcrum of a cut up universe. Here stood my every at-hand relative clucking over me instead of my daddy.

Are you hurt, Quinn?

You ignoramus.

Watch that glass or you're slice yourself good.

I was there, touchable and ripe for scolding, and Daddy was not. For just an instant, I took his place, could even get a whiff of his need to roam. I was a fussy fourteen year-old with no idea

of the world, and damnit, he'd left me to figure it on my own.

"Don't move," Mama said, and so I stayed, soaked in my own sweat, the backsplash of milk souring all over me.

She and Gran and Uncle Joel took to working in silence, sopping the milk up with towels and tossing them right in the garbage can. There was no saving them with so many glass splinters stuck in the weaves and the loops of cotton. The way my mama walked back and forth, and Gran, too, from my feet to the trash and back again, it was like they processed. It was holy. Uncle Joel even knelt and wiped, stood and knelt again. His knees, I could guess with my new knowledge, knees that he wrecked more in the service than in his high school glory days of football, they snapped with each dip of his to the floor. There'd been that initial cussing, and then no more. Under her breath I could hear Gran's litany: "It'll be all right, now. It'll be all right." Uncle Joel clicked the refrigerator door shut. And Mama hummed a churchy tune I couldn't place.

That was mid-December, with the house, before the letter burned, smelling of outdoors because of the pine boughs I'd dragged in from the woods that day to set atop the fireplace. Mama always liked the room holiday decorated, said she liked to smell tradition, one that every year had put Daddy in charge of cutting a last minute tree. Since I'd turned into a "Butterfingers" with that milk bottle, they wouldn't let me wield an axe. The branches I'd brought in dropped needles by Christmas but we left them stay. Grandma draped tinsel on them "to liven up the look of them and inspire hope," she said.

Hope was Pastor Evans's department, and he ran a tight ship, one reason why Uncle Joel wouldn't bother with church. Mama still wanted to go, especially with spring casting Sunday morning in a glow that nudges awake old expectations. Easter after all, His rising, the miracle of dead back to life. When we crossed into Church of Thou Most Holy Light, she had hold of my arm and I was glad to give it, happy to be Mama's companion wherever she needed or wanted to go, whatever way she lit upon to ease her scattered sense, her skip-a-beat heart, swallowed up whole as it was by Southeast Asia. There was nothing more I wanted to learn but that Daddy'd come through okay. Tell me that or tell me nothing, I thought. And nothing seemed to be the way of it.

Uncle Joel likened our Pastor Evans strutting in front of

the congregation to Jerry Lewis mugging and longwinded on his Labor Day Telethon.

"The man performs and angles for your hallelujahs," Uncle Joel said. "And I ain't interested in that kind of saving. Instead, I'll stay home and lift my voice in appreciation for your Granma's tea ring."

He was her brother. I imagined he'd pestered her all along from their childhood up to this here old age, and still she was granting him wishes. She sliced off a chunk of the cake for him before she Saran-wrapped the rest for the church's Meet and Greet.

"You're a good boy," Granma said as I carried the tea ring, oozing with cinnamon from where she'd cut it. After she got in the front passenger seat of the car, she yanked her stockings up from her ankles, then resettled the skirt of her dress. I placed the plate there in her lap. From the car's other side I crawled in back, folded my knees almost to my breastbone, and waited for Mama to drive.

No disrespect to Pastor Evans or his preaching but Sunday services brought us no further news of Daddy nor much comfort. Mama's four months of small hope faded and she took to sitting and smoking Kents in a back booth of Sinclair's, some days as early as four o'clock. Her worship gave way to wallow.

Our whole backyard, from the flat to where it steeps down to the river, was water-logged. I was wallowing, too, lost a shoe in that bog, had to dig it free the next day and then blast the muck off with the garden hose before setting the pair on the front porch for daylight to dry a hard crust into them. In place of the sun that gave up on April, blooming forsythia turned the world yellow. Even my drying-out shoes looked jaundiced.

Then Uncle Trey showed up at our door, a bit sallow-looking himself, from his time in the jungle. Uncle Trey was my dad's younger brother by five years. The two of them both were soldiers, but only Uncle Trey came home. Memories of my MIA dad were thick and hung up between low lying heaven and the muddy riverbank, evaporating a little more each day. We still felt Daddy on our skin, but the Miami crested and fell and come summer Uncle Trey was the realest thing going. Decoration Day's sun and heat had dried out the yard so I could push the lawn mower without it getting mired every two or three rows. Uncle Trey pulled Mama from her slide into Sinclair's.

Granma had me on my hands and knees yanking chickweed. For all the stuff that grew wild around there, she was fanatic about keeping a nice front yard.

"I want nothing but soft green grass on my bare feet in stepping all the way from this porch to that mailbox down at the road," she said.

Which meant rooting out dandelions and crab grass and flat runners of weeds and the insidious chickweed. Soon as I swallowed my last bite of pancake that morning, Gran slapped the rusty diggers in my palm and said, "Get at it." I'd been kneeling in the grass ever since, and working against a cramp in my left foot, the way I squatted and shifted to yank the chickweed free.

Uncle Joel rocked slowly in a webbed chair on the front porch. He was going to fill the silence, just a question of when.

Mama and Uncle Trey had revved off towards Whitewater Forest in his Cutlass, no other information offered. Gravel dust hung in the air, interfering with seeing, and breathing some. I coughed and yanked another clump of chickweed loose.

Uncle Joel said, "That smoker's cough, Quinn?"

"No, sir."

"Better not be. Better not let me catch you sneaking smokes."

I knew it was wise to say nothing. Once a nicotine fiend, Uncle Joel developed emphysema and became the pinnacle of reformation.

He said, "Breda's a live wire all of a sudden."

With Mama's departure dust died down, I saw Uncle Joel cock his eyebrows at Granma. Between brother and sister not much needed saying.

Granma sat snapping beans on the top porch step. She said. "The girl can't mourn and she can't move on. Leave her to smile some. Trey won't be here but awhile."

But that was a lie and we all three knew it.

The plans Uncle Trey had to skip east to a resort on the coast promising him work as groundskeeper evaporated into the catch-all mist that lingers along the river on a morning. He changed oil at the Tresler Comet on Severence Street over in North Bend, rented a shoebox apartment above the Butterkist Bakery around the block from there. He was found at our place mostly otherwise, I guess because Mama gave him reason.

Like Daddy, Uncle Trey had the body hair of a beast. A

full lumberjack beard could grow in no problem, but instead he nursed this FuManchu thing, trimmed and thinned it into the kind of wispy, black beard you'd find on a billy goat. Back from Vietnam and it was like he'd been transfused in the medic tent with some Asian blood. I saw the tinkly meditation bells hanging in his apartment, and he backed down from arguing, not that any of us wanted to fight him except Mama. She gave him guff just because she could, about his feet on the cocktail table, about him leaving the windows open in sight of rain, about having too romantic a soul.

She said, "Your head's in the clouds, Little Brother."

Uncle Trey said, "Only Derek can call me that."

When he hoisted himself from the river, Uncle Trey's thick dark leg hair streaked his thighs and shins, water dripped from the pelt on his chest, his arms. I thought of Jacob strapping an animal skin on his forearm to trick blind old Isaac into blessing him with his brother's birthright.

"He's nothing but a pipsqueak," Uncle Trey said of me to my mama, her laying there on the dock, sunning.

"He'll grow into himself." Then under her breath I heard her say, "Just fourteen," half as proof that she wasn't all that old either. Her eyes shuttered against the afternoon and Uncle Trey. It was all an act.

Uncle Trey, water running rivulets down his hairy legs, shook himself and his thick dark head of hair out above Mama, showering her.

She looked at him with a lazy smile, said, "You dog." then closed herself back up. She flirted like the girls I rode the bus with from Roundup Junior High. Feminine wiles, I remembered Daddy once warning me. I caught the girls' sweet sayings, which were not to me but to each other.

"What are your summer plans, Quinn?" Uncle Trey made the move every snake knows as well as its own cold blood: cosy up to a woman through her kid.

I thought of the driving range, so close to the Gymkhana Club. "Maybe I'll take up golf."

"There's a sport suits you, whacking the hell out of something small," Uncle Trey said.

Mama shot me a look that made me want to hurt her by saying something more but I quit. With brothers Trey and Derek looking so alike, I couldn't help but excuse her. She'd been sleep-

walking herself, she said, since word came Daddy was missing, and had given up on gaining rest until the day they put her in her grave.

“That doesn’t mean I’m headed home to glory any time soon,” she once said, laughing off our worries over her doing something desperate. “Plenty of living left to do. And I intend to.”

Uncle Trey was going to be her partner. Young as I was, I could see that and I wasn’t judging, only wondering how she or anyone knew when love was truly a lost cause.

Daddy had married Mama the summer after they graduated high school, with Uncle Trey just as old then as I was that summer, between grades eight and nine. I didn’t blame Uncle Trey for making time with my mama. I thought he’d be around to teach me things, guy things, things Daddy maybe would have.

I often woke, couldn’t say where I’d been or where I was, the sleepwalking still dogging me. I worked to sweep the fog from my brain and remembered we were in July, that school’d let out. I got a summer job at the TC, Uncle Trey’s good word to thank for that. Everything was set except my loyalty leaked into that mist between land and sky, where I came this close to touching the sleeve of my dad’s uniform, could nearly feel his arm taut inside the Army-issued cloth, about ready to spring a headlock on me. My feet were soothed by the front yard’s wet grass, long, needing mowing, smooth as a girl’s combed hair in most places, except where I pulled that chickweed some spots tufted up in cowlicks. I was checking the mailbox for letters in my sleep. Cold and wet where I grasped metal and the screech from when I yanked the empty thing open cracked the night in two. The light of the mid-summer moon seemed the only thing helping me to find my way back.

Uncle Trey picked up where Daddy left off, calling me Mighty Quinn.

At the TC he yelled from underneath a shiny blue Bonneville that sported an America, Love It Or Leave It sticker. “Hey, hand me a rag there, O Mighty Quinn.”

Already surrounded by a half dozen dirty rags, he didn’t need another. He just wanted to say my name, draw me in. We were the only two in the place, 9:30 on a slow summer night and close to quitting.

I dropped by his elbow the cloth I used to wipe grimy handprints from the plate glass door.

The car hid Uncle Trey, and that’s probably how he

preferred talking to me, nothing like the eye to eye Daddy employed to make me take notice the times he traipsed through and took fatherhood seriously. Instead, it was Uncle Trey's voice carrying the authority. Like he had any right.

“Mighty Quinn. You living right, living clean?”

“What are you talking about?” I had my own edge and I was honing it.

“Your mama, she worries. Doesn't really feel she knows how to talk to you any more.”

“And you do?”

Uncle Trey slid out from under the hood of the car. “Hey, I was a boy once.”

“Oh yeah, when was that?”

“Before we shipped out.”

That “we” shut us both up. I admired the good job I'd done cleaning the glass door. Uncle Trey checked time on the wall clock, let his gaze drop down to the drinking fountain.

“Make sure you spray that with some Lysol,” he said. Wheels allowed him to disappear under the Bonneville again, except for his jean clad legs and his steel toed boots. He said, “Ain't right Derek's not here.”

Just the beginning of ain't right, I thought.

“He knew guys were getting blown apart right and left but he still re-upped. Not saying he had a death wish or—“

“He ain't dead.”

Uncle Trey rolled far enough free that I could see his face warped in the fender of the car he was draining.

“Not that we know of,” I said.

“Know, don't know. We can run through our whole life chasing knowledge. That's not the way of it.”

He was trotting out his Buddha garbage.

“You mean the path of least resistance? Sounds like a lazy way to live to me.”

“Least resistance, yes,” he said. “In a way. Haven't you ever heard Let the mountain come to Mohammed?”

Too many religions and I wasn't versed in any of them. Pastor Evans' hokey pulpit act looked mighty solid compared to the self-examination bull Uncle Trey was laying on me.

“Tell me something useful,” I said.

He peeked from under the car and looked up at me. “What are you asking?”

I had a whole list in my head, but the easiest to hang words on was advice about Sally Ann. I didn't have the nerve to see his eyes size me up so I polished the chrome of the drinking fountain with a rag. We could both be industrious and give each other the room we needed to flex our muscles. "What kind of word's going to spark a girl's interest? I mean, get her to really look?"

From under the Bonneville, where he retreated, he said, "Well, let's face it, women love to hear about themselves. Comment in a good way about her hair or her clothes or her long gorgeous legs."

Obviously, his subject was Mama. Uncle Trey couldn't know of Sally's beautiful legs, the shape of her calves made purely to fit against my open palm as she stood to pump her bicycle uphill, with me lagging behind. When we rode around North Bend to Harrison's Tomb, I let her better my pace for this very reason. We were friends of the sort still tied to childhood, but I wanted more, though I wasn't sure what exactly. Her daddy was criss-crossing the country with his band called The Outlaws; mine used the army to crowbar him from muddy Miamitown. Given time, we could raise more banter. Both of us wanting what wasn't around could be our common topic to start.

Uncle Trey must have been mulling the matter, but I'd stopped listening. When he spoke again, his words rose into the car's oil pan so I couldn't understand what he said.

Then he rolled from underneath the car like he was about to impart some wisdom I should take to heart. I wanted to kick him in the ribs, he lay so defenseless to my suffering standing self.

"Most women aren't trying to be contrary," he said. "They're simply testing your intentions, seeing how much ground you're willing to give. It's a kind of war. They might call it War of the Sexes, but it's more a skirmish." His gaze locked on that clock on the wall, which said we were way past quitting time. "If you're lucky, nobody takes a hurt that's too everlasting."

In the dark that lays out a red carpet to eavesdroppers, I heard Mama on the front porch say to Uncle Trey, "You'll never be Derek."

He shot back with, "And don't I know it."

Quickly then, her footsteps followed by another's, and the decided click as her door latched into the groove in the doorframe. As a boy, I'd rubbed my fingers in that little gully a hundred times,

just dawdling outside her open door, looking in when she wasn't there.

I could have busted right in, blamed the sleepwalking, but I was chicken. Just like me being unable to muster school bus conversation with those chatty girls. I looked for ways in which Sally Ann and Mama were the same, and adding it up I realized they had too much in common for me to hold in my head. I mean, I felt I needed to chart it on paper — their beauty and the way they rewarded my faith in them with deeper confusion.

When ninth grade began, Sally Ann had reverted to her given name. "Call me Sarah," she told the teachers as they checked off their class rosters on the first day. While I was eliminating chickweed, she'd pierced her ears, bleached her blond hair blonder, and learned how to flaunt her collarbones in a peasant blouse. I needed to get to know her all over again, work I'd happily tackle, like one of those math problems I was good at about rate and time and distance, two trains bound for the same destination.

On the bus home there was never enough room to sit; some of us had to stand. The metal curve of the seat frame dug into my thigh when I leaned down to speak. "You go to the beach in August?"

She shook her head no. "Uh-uh."

"How'd you do this then, get so blond?" I lifted a hank of her hair and set it back so it bent on her shoulder. The way she wore it hid too much of her face.

She looked up at me. "Sun-In. From the drugstore."

Her eyes were a true and deep brown. She wore a macrame choker with garnet colored beads woven in, which tied at the back of her neck. It made me think of the story we read in eighth grade, where a necklace is all that keeps a woman's head attached to the rest of her. I gripped the edge of my notebook and grasped the back of Sarah's seat, to prevent me from tugging loose the threads at the edge of her brilliant hair, to test her. In my head thrummed Mama's plea in the kitchen with Daddy's lips on her throat years before. Ravishing. I wanted to ravish this girl.

"You got taller," she said.

"It happens." I shrugged, pleased to be at the center of what she was keeping back.

Sarah didn't have to splash herself over me all at once. Steadying myself in the bus aisle, I fought a tremendous urge to leap down the three steps and run to the riverbank flat-out,

downhill, with no close branches to grab and help slow the hammering in my chest. The bus lurched, braked, coughed. Sarah, standing because this was her stop, bumped my hip with hers. It could have been accident, sure. A miracle, really, her voice laughing, telling me to move it, her breath so near she fogged words on my neck. Blond hair jagged in her eyes, and then she shook her head, nothing negative in the act, before nudging past, the whole of her receding from me in worn blue jeans and limp peasant blouse, her hair aglow. Before the bus driver folded the doors closed, I swooped forward and leapt down the steps, almost landing on one of Sarah's feet in those clogs of hers.

When she said, "Hey," I thought on Uncle Trey's advice regarding women and how they said one thing and often meant the direct opposite. I heard "Hey" as meaning "Walk with me," and so I fell in step with her. The balls of my feet stung from jumping out of the bus. My knees took a good jolt, too, left me kind of wavery. I could have been a parachuting grunt, I felt so lightheaded, the humid late afternoon of August covering every bit of me with its film. If Sarah was a jungle flower, and God knows she was something sweet and abloom, then it was Uncle Trey's words I bumped up against inside my head, and my dad's voice, which I had been aching to hear for just about forever, was like the radio weatherman's in a sleet storm, crackled faint with a static that told me he was out of my range.

Jericho

You make me forget
to crouch behind my
tall, sandy stone

rough, cold and high

my wall
the wall You
transfigure to just our

reflection in a silent
mountain pond
tucked beneath wheaten

sugar maple leaves
and steady fires of dogwoods
against evergreen depths of cedars

and cypress trees, beneath air
laden with the fragrant balm
of wet, fallen foliage –

grave clothes for seedtime

You make me forget
I fear hot, crumbling
dust from stone walls

being open, being not alone

Homeplace

for Granny

I see you standing on hazel stone
porch steps, white sundress and blonde

curls a-flurry in the clean mountain breeze
stroking Ma's Seven Sister roses,

crimson petals against the gray
channeled bark of the homeplace

sugar maple, a Tuskegee girl on her way
to Yellowcreek Baptist Church. I see

mountains rising behind you

shining new leaves and evergreen trees
against the heavy glow of blue sky on June

Sundays when creeks splash echoes of eternal praise
over round, smooth river rocks and you step

down to caress the soft roses with your
tan fingertips – sweet and strong.

Yellow Rind, Sour Fruit

We mixed gin and lemonade,
lemons sliced thin as fingernails,
a yellow pale as the evening's
skinny moon. We drank our glittery stew
in the attic bedroom of your parents' house.
Hot air rises, I told you,

and we moved with it from armchairs
to bed, our cotton underwear
all that kept our bodies apart.
Earlier we walked to town
in a slow rain, drank beer
all afternoon, planned

what we'd remember in twenty years.
Headed home. We stopped to watch
the river's impossibly swift water
strip bricks from a forgotten house.
I had come to you from so far. You tossed
rocks at vanished windows

until a man leaned from the third floor,
crying out. Which one of us left
first? I expected more that night,
the hottest I've ever known. My skin
was dressed in diamond beads,

damp below my breasts. There
wasn't any moon. A light
above the garage burned white
into daylight, our mouths, our
palms. There was still time for you
to go downstairs, where we knew
your mother was already awake.

It was nearly time. And you?
What was your day to become?
The peel of cotton
against a gauzy morning
forgotten? Where

was that night, the strong light
that slicked translucent,
washed out, clear as gin?

Home Movie Montage

I sleep.

He gives me his bed and his parents' dog.
The curl of unabashed white fur
Presses up against my human flesh,
My heart thumping in solitude,
Groaning with the tell-tale creaks
Of old wood supports and mattress springs.

We watch a late movie in an emptied theatre.
My head piles messy locks in his lap,
Arms sprawl across and around and into.
We behave, unlike teenagers, aging into being
Without touching (this time),
eating popcorn and sour gummies instead

He is tired and sleeping on the couch
I cling to the goodbyes of the night as
My eyes droop, and I stumble
Up stairs in the darkness and
Dodge the imaginary bats
Swooping down from his tall tales.

He puts his arm around my waist
When we walk back from the car
We cast long moon shadows
On the slope of his driveway
Where ghosts slide around the basketball hoop
And dive into the hedges.

I warm under old college flannels,
Grandmother's hand-worked quilts
He wakes me in the night and

Wraps his silky blanket around me,
Whispers of his little boy secrets.
I rub my eyes to see clearly.

I am awake.

Russian Roulette

The kitchen is cold and still I sit at the table staring at the off-white envelope in my hand. I turn it over and over and stare at the stamp and the handwritten address on the front. It makes my skin crawl.

I look away from the letter and gaze out the kitchen window, mindlessly staring at my children playing outside in the backyard. I watch them crouch on hands and knees and then leap like little frogs into the piles of crunchy leaves I raked this morning. The array of reds and golds scatter aimlessly around my children's laughing forms and settle on the newly mown grass.

Glancing back at the letter in my hand, I slowly read the writing across the front. In the center it says ALICIA JOANNE CHRISTOPHER in black block letters, all caps. Underneath the name, my address is scrawled in hurried pencil.

Alicia Joanne Christopher.

That's my name. At least it was before I got married. Now I'm Alicia Joanne Christopher Smith. I never wanted to be a Smith, to tell the truth. It's such a boring name. But that's beside the point. The card isn't addressed to Alicia Smith. It says Alicia Joanne Christopher and I can't open it. That's not who I am anymore.

The crisp smell of grass and leaves filters through the open window. I watch my girls outside as one of the neighbor boys saunters into the yard and sends my younger daughter screaming into the safety of the garage. I can hear her shout iBoy, cooties! as she dashes out of sight. My oldest stays outside and talks to the boy in hushed tones that I can't overhear. What a beautiful carefree life they live. How different from my own.

I smell the leaves through the window and look at that wrinkled little envelope in my hand. I can just see the little town called Aldersville where I grew up years ago. That god-forsaken little town where everybody knew my name and I didn't know any of theirs. I still hate that place.

Every day of my childhood, I went to school and came home and didn't talk to anyone who didn't make a specific effort to

talk to me. I fidgeted during school and tried to make the time go by faster so that I could go home and keep my daddy from killing my momma while he drank. I didn't take piano lessons or dance or go to girl scouts like the other girls did. I went to school and went home, went to school and went home, every single day of my childhood.

My daddy was a drunk, and a mean one at that. At least that's what everyone told me. When I was in fifth grade, I went to school one day with a big green bruise on my cheek from where I'd tried to keep Daddy from hitting Momma's head on the edge of the kitchen table. My teacher took one look at that shiner and reported my family to child services. I went home and told Momma to get prepared for another house call.

Sure enough, the government sent out a social worker to visit the house. Momma cleaned and set the table with our best china every night that week. She made me wear my nicest Sunday dresses and curled my red-blond locks into baby soft ringlets each morning before school. Daddy hid the beer cans and stayed sober the whole week. That next Monday afternoon, the little bald social worker walked out our door, scratching his shiny head and wondering why they'd sent him to visit such a happy home.

Life wasn't quite as happy as it seemed when we put on our little show for the social workers that showed up at our door every so often. My daddy drank like a skunk, and was proud of it too. He could hold his alcohol better than most, but when he finally got drunk, he got mean, and when he got mean things got violent around our house. When Daddy drank, he liked to beat Momma, and, when I tried to stop it, he liked to beat me too.

Daddy's two favorites were cheap beer and vodka mixed with my little brother's favorite cherry Kool-Aid. One time, when Trent was about two years old, Daddy was drinking some vodka and Kool-Aid out of Trent's sippy cup. When he was done, he left it on the table about half full and Momma gave it to Trent before she realized what it was. I remember Momma screaming and forcing some kind of medicine down Trent's throat. He gagged all over the kitchen floor and stained my new white shirt with runny red and orange blotches of the Kool-Aid and cheese slices he'd just eaten.

I still have that little white t-shirt, even though I'm more than fifty pounds to heavy to wear it anymore. I keep it in my underwear drawer and pull it out when my husband's not looking. Sometimes, when he's out of town, I sleep with it next to me in bed.

I still swear I can smell the vomit, my Daddy's beer, and my Momma's flowers all tangled up in the faded white fabric when I hold it close to my nose. I might sleep with it tonight. Maybe Evan won't notice. He doesn't notice much.

The smells are what I remember most about home. The smells of beer and vodka mixed with the foul odor of vomit on my Daddy's breath. Somehow Daddy's smells merge with the memories of Momma's lavender perfume and the daisies she kept on the kitchen table in a plastic cup.

Beer, vomit, lavender, and daisies—I can smell them now, sitting in my cold kitchen all alone in the shadows of the fading sunset streaming through the open slats of the kitchen blinds. Those smells seem so much stronger with this worn out envelope in my hand. I don't know why, but they always do.

My momma was a good woman. She tried so hard to raise us right. She took me and Trent to church just about every Sunday that Daddy would let us out of the house. We would slip in just after the service started and sit on the back row near the door for a quick escape route. The older women in their Sunday hats and patent leather purses would turn and cut their eyes back and forth from their pious front row pews to our lonely row near the back while they whispered to one another about my daddy's drinking problem. Momma just examined the tops of her worn black shoes until the service ended and she could take us home. She always looked miserable at church. I never really understood why we even bothered to go.

Unlike Momma, Daddy never graced the doors of a church with his presence. He said he was going straight to hell and he knew it. As long as you're sure about where you're going, I guess everything's alright. To tell the truth, that's probably where I'm going. I haven't been to church since Daddy left and Momma died.

Daddy left us when I was seventeen—twelve years ago today. I was a senior in high school, looking forward to graduation in the spring and maybe college in the fall. Trent was seven when Daddy left and my baby sister Maria was five. I don't think Maria remembers much about Daddy. Maybe she blocked out the memories. Repression, the psychologist called it. Or maybe she just didn't know him. Either way, I guess it's a good thing.

Momma shot herself three days after Daddy walked out the door. March 28, my eighteenth birthday. She left me a present

all wrapped up in pretty pink paper with a card on top and a daisy stuck underneath the ribbon. The card said, "Happy Birthday Alicia. I love you. Momma." That's it. No goodbye. I kept the card and the daisy and threw the present away. I didn't even open it first. I kind of wish I had.

I found her in the tub with an empty bottle of pills in her hand, a gun on the floor, and a hole in the side of her head. She must have held the gun right up to her skull. That's what the autopsy said anyway. That bullet took out her ear and most of the side of her face. I was scrubbing the blood out of the bathtub when the ambulance came to take Momma away.

The social workers swarmed the house, asking where my Daddy was and our ages and names and the names of our closest family members. I told them I didn't know about Daddy, our names weren't any of their business, and we didn't have any close family. I think Trent finally answered their questions since I wasn't being too helpful.

Apparently they couldn't find Daddy or he just didn't care. Or maybe Trent told what a mean drunk Daddy was. Either way it didn't matter. He didn't come.

They shipped us off to an aunt I didn't like and I lived there until I turned twenty and got pregnant with my first child by a man fifteen years my senior. My aunt kicked me out of the house and I married the fool.

Evan is an orthodontist and makes a killing. I guess that's probably why I liked him in the first place. It certainly wasn't his last name that attracted me to the man. Smith. God, I hate that name.

Evan and I have been married for the past nine years. We have three children, a one-acre lot with a swing set, and two golden retriever puppies in the backyard. Our house is still listed at \$350,000 even though it's been almost ten years now since we bought it. We have archways in the foyer, marble tiles in the bathrooms, and an antique polished wooden table in the dining area. There's a garden tub in the bathroom connected to my bedroom that shoots out hard jets of steamy water when my back gets sore. The children each have their own room and a gigantic playroom downstairs in the finished basement.

I go to the club on Mondays, have my nails done on Tuesdays, tan by the pool on sunny summer Wednesdays, and volunteer for the PTA at my children's elementary school on

Thursdays. I belong to a tennis club where I play on the weekends while Evan plays golf with the boys. I sleep under a goose-down comforter, we have a hot tub in the back yard, and we hire a live-in nanny to stay with our youngest, who just turned two.

As I sit at the kitchen table, I look out the open designer blinds and watch the silhouettes of my two oldest children run around in the shadows of my backyard. My baby is downstairs in the playroom with the nanny. My husband is at work and I am in the kitchen alone.

My husband will be home soon and I haven't started dinner. I can hear the children shouting as they play tag in the backyard. They will be hungry when they come back inside. Maybe Evan will be home late tonight. He does that sometimes, works late, that is. Sometimes I wish he would call and let me know.

I'm still holding the little off-white envelope in my hand and I haven't moved. I run my fingers over its smooth edges, but I can't bring myself to break the seal. I lean back in my chair, close my eyes, and breath deeply. Beer, vomit, lavender, and daisies—the smells fill my senses and I can't breathe. I keep my eyes closed and pray the familiar scents away.

I'm twenty-nine years old and I'm not Alicia Joanne Christopher any more. I'm Alicia Joanne Christopher Smith. Every pleasure this life has to offer is available at my fingertips and I hate it. I hate every minute of it.

I look out the window at my children and I hate the part of them that is Alicia Joanne Christopher. I hate the fact that their last name is Smith. I hate it that I have three children just like my mother and I hate the fact that I'm thinking this way.

Daddy left twelve years ago—today.

I scoot my polished antique chair back from the polished antique table and I carry the little off-white envelope that smells so much like home over to the trashcan where I toss it in. I pad over to the end table by the couch in my bare feet and socks and open the drawer closest to the top. Evan's pistol stares back at me with vacant eyes. I touch it and it comforts me.

One bullet. Six tries. Today marks number three.

And the ritual begins—yet again.

I take the pistol and pad back over to the trashcan where I pull the little white envelope back out. I smooth its wrinkles and read the name written above the return address in those familiar block letters, all caps.

JAMES CHRISTOPHER.

My father.

Daddy.

With the pistol in one hand and the letter in the other, I climb the stairs to the bedroom I share with Evan, take off my brand new pink blouse and khaki skirt, and toss them by the door. I climb into the empty garden tub, the one that shoots out the hot jets of steamy water, tossing my underwear and bra over its marbled side. I curl up until my head is resting on the bottom of the tub and my toes are sticking out on top.

From my position, I can still hear the children laughing in the backyard. I can hear the baby and the nanny playing on the swing set. The neighbor boy must be gone. I can't hear his voice anymore.

The bathroom window is open. The breeze blows long strands of my hair across my face and down my arms and chest to caress my naked body. I stare at myself as I lay in the tub and I trace the scar that runs the length of my side with the tip of my pinky finger. I got this scar when I was fifteen and Daddy hit me with a beer bottle. It split open my side and I had to have stitches. I took the blow for Momma and I'm glad for it. At least it shows I helped some.

I pick up the gun and hold the cold metal close to my chest. The cold sears my skin and I'm paralyzed for the moment. I breathe a *God help me* into the stillness just in case he still listens to my prayers. I close my eyes count to ten and hope God will let me into heaven with Momma instead of sending me to hell with Daddy.

I count to ten, pull the trigger, and wait in the darkness as my world spins behind my closed eyelids.

I wiggle my toes.

I'm not dead.

Shit.

I hear the garage door open and listen to my girls scream, *Daddy!* as his car pulls into driveway. I lift myself from the tub and place the gun safely in my top dresser drawer. The bullet is still inside. The game continues. It just wasn't my day.

I put my clothes back on and shove the worn, wrinkled letter in my pocket as I walk down the stairs. I straighten my hair and fix my plastic smile into place as I open the back door.

Evan greets me with a smile and a kiss. He wants to know

when dinner will be. I tell him thirty minutes. He wants to know what we're having. I tell him grilled chicken and potatoes.

He picks up the baby and leans down for another kiss. I close my eyes and smell the wind. Beer, vomit, lavender, and daisies. My breath catches in my throat and I glance at Evan. He is playing with the girls and doesn't notice me. He never does.

I stick my hand in my pocket and feel the familiar roughness of the letter secure against my palm. I smile and walk toward the kitchen to start dinner for my family. I look at my toes and whisper toward the floor, *One day I'll do it Daddy.*

One bullet. Six tries. Today marks number three.

One day I'll do it, Daddy.

One day I really will.

The Sound of a Bullet

She laid beautifully, peacefully on the meadow
She was at her home
Where she belonged to the den
As much as it belonged to her
Watching diligently her children
One by one nurturing them
To grow strong
To be the lions they are destined to be
The ones nature calls upon
To raise a new life, a new generation
Only to continue the circle of life
Which their ancestors have long known
They play with one another
And sleep securely with their mother
Laying eyes on them for the last time
For tomorrow, her eyes were not to see light
In the early dawn did our eyes meet
I was looking for a new home
And theirs was to be mine alone
The redness in her eyes still hunts me
As I put my own children to sleep
Pierces my soul in the stillness of the night
Asking where her children are at
Who woke up to nothing and perhaps even less
I alone hold the answers
As to why now the circle of life stands disturbed
Vanishing into the sound of a bullet
The very last of a heart beat
Announcing violently the beginning of the end
What becomes of lions with no mothers?
My door is always locked
My gun replaced my wife
What becomes of children
Raised in the place of lions?
Underneath, a den still lies
Mixed echoes of lions roaring
And children crying take shelter in one another
At the echo of a bullet.

My Grandma Im Saleem

In an old restaurant,
Decorated with plastic plants,
Im Kalthum* was played
Resurrecting an old memory of a home
That has only become a ghost.
I desperately seek a living remnant
The song resonates within my soul
Other tunes of that land
A bald old man, with a big moustache,
Dark skin and big rough hands,
Brings me water
I smile: does he know my song?
Secret whispers come from hookahs
Pictures of a mosque and a church
The smell of food brings pictures and sounds
Of when my mother used to make me eat
Grapes leaves and Zukini
The smell of Arabic coffee brings back
Early mornings with
Old people sitting at balconies
Sipping coffee talking about the future
My grandma is reading in my cup,
“You will travel many places. Maktub.”**
Does the cup say when I will come back?
“No. But, I see a group of people.
Who love you greatly,” she says.
I look in my cup to find it but I cannot
It only takes a wise old person,
Like my grandma Im Saleem,
Drinking Arabic coffee to see that.

* A traditional old Arabic singer

** Written, or destined

Devil

The fern of your disbelief dangles poised on my cerebral porch.
Complacent in its fortress,
you have sent me a personal invitation
to your lair of unwilling hostages,
who walk no only blindfolded – but broke,
forced to pay homage.
During my recess,
you mount released stress upon my weary body,
haunting my inner peace,
you then compose the black chords of despair
which play colder than a Bronx blizzard.
Deep in your dungeon,
you administer six-hundred and sixty-six routes
of which one can follow your evil.
It is a shame to say
that at my age
I have already seen about five-hundred of these roads,
but of this I cannot hate you for,
though you are one blood hungry and sickly witch.
I now realize I will never travel the remaining one-hundred
sixty-six, since
you have only made me stronger.

Refuge

I gaze upon your countenance
through the dust and pollen-encrusted windows
of a beat-up 1995 Pontiac
pausing to think how fitting it is
since that was the year
I walked away from you
for good.
You never tried to stop me
as I looked back
for one last goodbye
knowing that we may never meet again.
But times were simpler then
and I find myself longing
for the whimsy and magic
of those days
when you would clothe me
with pale violet and cedar
and all I had to do was run to you
to find refuge within your strength.
In your depths
we were warriors
an ancient clan
sworn to protect you against invisible opponents
that sprung from the inner recesses of our imaginations.
In your heights
we were ghosts
creating havoc
and banging about on hardwood beams
that echoed our merriment for miles.
In your heart
we were a family
discussing our daydreams
while hiding mushy peas
beneath the seat covers.

Behind your back
we were reckless
chasing dinosaurs
and throwing rainbow spheres
at mighty walls
of oak and pine.
Through it all
was the comforting knowledge
that the mighty winds
that swirled around us unexpectedly
may break through
but never destroy
so long as you stood
and vowed eternal vigilance.
And now
after a decade of wandering
I find myself returning to you
and finding you right where I left you
still standing
and yet forever changed.
You have someone else
to love you now
and I wonder
if they could ever
come to love you as I did.
Do they bring you joy?
Have their new memories
made you forget the ones we made
so lovingly?
I envy you
for you did not have to see
our loss
but I thank God you were not there
because it would have shattered your heart
as it did mine.
For I know
you loved him too
and I know
you still remember
the care he took with you
keeping you beautiful

in the eyes of the passers-by.
That is why
I return to you now
when I need him the most
because I know I will find him there
right where we left you.

Chicken Killing Day

My brother, Larry stepped into the room. His cotton shirt, rolled up at his biceps, held a pack of cigarettes in the left sleeve. His black oiled hair was slicked back on both sides and the bangs came to a point in the middle of his forehead. His nose glistened with sweat beads. My brother is up to something, I thought, allowing him to scratch my head and tousle my hair, my eyes red with sleep.

Later that morning I sat on the porch. I wore a sundress and my toes dug into the dirt. Maybe I was seven or eight—it's hard to pinpoint the exact age.

My mother carried a knife. Bags of hominy hung from the clothesline.

"Okay, Artie, bring that chicken over here," my mother commanded.

She mumbled something about "need to get these things killed and dressed before it gets too hot" as I joined her in the middle of the yard.

She must have been watching my brother, Larry, for some time, pretending to be concentrating on the chicken under the board. He was standing by the fruit cellar, a gallon pickle jar in his hand. There was an old faded pillowcase on the ground beside him. I thought at first it must be filled with little colored bottles he collected from the dump, but when the clothe moved and he stepped in front of it, I could tell the case held something he was attempting to hide.

"He's up to mischief," my mother said, stepping down hard on the board under her feet. She sounded far away. Her eyes were on my older brother. She pulled back on the chicken. I heard the breaking of small bones, and a tear and she gave the body a toss. It went bouncing around the yard—the head lay flaccid at her feet.

I stood there in silence, trying to hide the fact I was watching my brother. In the deep blue of summer sky his black hair stood out like a witch's hat. The tree behind was laden with red cherries. One of my mother's hands was limp at her side and I

reached up and took it, feeling the gold band on her finger.

My brother stood in that 'feet-apart, hand-on-hips' manner of a cowboy. While my mother eyed the pillowcase, she rubbed sweat from her forehead. I was looking at the newly forming clouds trying to decide if one looked more like a horse or a dragon.

I pictured my brother, Larry, standing at the door of a castle. I imagined his handsome face encircled in a wire mesh hanging down from a helmet, his hands holding a shield and a lance. He would ride slowly, as I'd seen him do on our pony and take a long time to enter the gate and dismount with grace. He would pet the mane of his horse, Charlemagne, with long, loving strokes while the occupants of the castle rushed out to greet him.

My mother removed her hand from mine, leaving my fingers feeling empty. I rested them on my thigh. My mother followed my gaze. She always seemed to know what I was thinking. "I think it's a horse," she said. "One that can outrun all the other horses alive."

I smiled. "And can carry a knight into battle," I replied.

"Yeah, until he carries his plan too far."

I wondered what she meant by that, as if a Knight of the Round Table could do anything wrong. I guessed by her quiet voice that she meant nothing. There was no warning in her tone.

"And don't go making him a king."

My older brother wasn't really a king, or a knight, for that matter. Larry hunted and fished in the manner of Davy Crocket. He knew about rifles and lures, the right ones and the wrong ones to use. And he knew how to make a natural trap for an animal and how to find the constellations. He told me why I liked to read. It had to do with my being born on a night The Big Dipper was particularly bright. I believed him, because I always read best when the moon looked like a penny in the sky and The Big Dipper was clearly visible.

Larry scoffed at mediocrity and boredom, and each day found a new adventure to strike out on. He'd sing with his guitar, hunt pheasants, deer, squirrels and morel mushrooms and fish for walleye and pike. Our mother called those hunting and fishing trips 'putting food on the table'. Our fruit cellar was packed with canned jars of peas, corn, pickles and meat. My mother made sure the shelves were always full.

"My kids won't starve," she would say. She was never a sullen woman who complained. She was a worker, a caregiver and a provider for her eight children.

My mother's brother, Harold, became a Navy man. He went to Pearl Harbor, married a woman and came back injured. He became a carpenter like our grandfather. I didn't know him well, but knew by the gentleness of his walk and the softness of his eyes that he had never killed anything but something to put on the table.

"What do you think he's up to?" My mother asked Artie who held another squawking chicken, pushed it into her arms, then turned and dashed away.

Something in my mother's voice was sad and lonely. I looked at her face, looked at my brother and looked back at my mother again. I never had thought of her as a human being before. She was just the woman who cooked and told us what to do, but something about how she stood there that day made me look inside her bones. She was the one who knew what you thought, but suddenly I knew how she did it. It was the concentrated stare, the body language and the set of the facial muscles and eyes that gave the inner secrets away. As quick as the flash of a camera, I saw what my mother was thinking and in seconds my amazement began to mount when Larry bent and raised the cellar door. I began to look for animals in the clouds again. I saw an anteater and when it disappeared, Larry's head slipped totally out of view below the cellar door.

My mother, a pot of boiling water in front of her, was bending over her work pulling the feathers out of a chicken. Nearby her two youngest children played a game of catch, throwing the ball as high as they could. The brown and white Shetland pony grazed near the fence that separated the yard from the hayfield. My sister and I were upstairs at the window. We turned and bending down on our knees, leaned close to the open heater vent in the floor. Larry and Artie were sitting directly below at a card table pouring molten lead into sinker molds.

"So, what do you think she'll do when she sees it?" Artie asked.

"Faint."

"Really?"

"Well, either that, or scream. I'd guess—faint. Did you see the size of that thing?"

"Yeah," Artie said, glancing furtively over his shoulder.

Julie grabbed my arm and squeezed. I put my hand over my mouth, suppressing any sound that might escape. She pulled me off the floor and pushed me through our bedroom door, through

our brother's bedroom, and then towards the stairway.

"This is going to be good," she said, chuckling.

"He shouldn't do it," I said in a frightened tone.

"You chicken. You wouldn't try anything fun!" she sneered.

We slipped through the kitchen, passed the living room door and stepped outside.

On the porch Julie nearly collapsed from laughing. I held my fist up to my mouth to suppress my tears.

"Did you hear that? They're going to get a licking! And good," Julie said, slapping her knee.

I looked toward the willow tree in the front yard. The switching branches looked menacing and gigantic. I glanced toward the barn. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"You think Larry will pick a big one for himself?" Julie asked, folding her body onto the steps and smiling broadly at our mother's back.

I shuddered. When one of the kids got in trouble, my mother made you pick out your own switch for the punishment. Course I never got whipped, my stepfather had other ways of punishing me—ways that had to be kept a secret from the rest of the world.

I lowered my head. I didn't want my mother to see my face or my eyes and I did the best I could to make my body language say nothing about what I was thinking, but I knew how good my mother was at knowing my thoughts. It wasn't long before I felt sick to my stomach. I stood and ran, heading for the outhouse. Artie's laughter followed me down the path passed the cherry trees and the long house that was loaded with junk from the dump.

During supper preparations that evening I could hear the farmer across the road out in the field on the tractor. My mother stood at the stove humming a tune to the rhythm of the tractor's engine. She had changed her dress and she hummed.

"Where's Larry?" Mom asked, turning from the stove and wiping her hands on an apron.

"The table's set," I told her, praying for nothing to happen.

My stepfather walked in and sat at the head of the table. I kept my eyes on the floor. I felt dread, a sense of expectancy, a 'please leave me alone' kind of feeling.

"Wash your hands," my mother said automatically, lifting the heavy pot from the stove.

On the other side of the room where the door went to the porch was the son my mother was concerned about. She pretended to be looking at Artie who stood nearby, but I could tell she was looking at Larry. He had a nonchalant look on his face and his black hair was oiled and slicked back over his ears. His eyes were fixed on my mother's like he was a hypnotist or something. My mother took a step forward and set the steaming pot on the table; her gaze never left his. I remember that as clearly as I remember we had chicken and noodles that night.

I didn't know if it was just me, or if everyone else in the room felt cold. It was like someone had turned the natural thermostat down and the hot, humid room dropped to 30 degrees in less than a second. The whole kitchen chilled.

My stepfather lowered his head and said the prayer. Mom picked up the bowl of mash potatoes and passed them to her right. Artie rolled his fork between his hands, his eyes watching Larry, his red hair sticking out in all directions. Larry leaned toward me and handed me the creamed corn, "Here, little dreamer," he said. That's what he called me—little dreamer.

Later, my mother was in her favorite living room chair with my youngest sister and brother reading a book. A table fan sat on the floor. The blades whirled.

"Now, you go put on your pajamas," she said as she slipped the little ones off her lap. "You done in there yet?" she asked over her shoulder.

"One more pan," I said.

With the dishrag still in my hand, my mouth dropped open as I watched Larry enter the room and put his finger to his lips to hush us.

"Okay," my mother yelled, "Time to wrap up that job."

I looked from my brother's handsome face, to his neck, to the back of my mother's head. My sister followed my gaze and her eyes lit up. She put her fist into the air and wagged it.

Artie, who was four at the time, sat on the bottom step of the stairway and tears streamed down his face. A hissing sound traveled toward the living room. Please, I silently begged, if you do it, he'll take me to the barn. Please don't!

My mother turned, put her hand to her mouth and dropped to the floor like a wet bag of laundry.

Later that night, in a sudden crash, lightening split the sky and thunder rumbled over the sleeping farmhouse. Soaked, from

stumbling in from the barn, I crept up the stairway, walked through the boy's room, slipped into bed and pulled the sheet up over my head. Downstairs, I heard the door of my parent's door softly close. I shivered and stared up at the ceiling and prayed words I had said to my mother before, but she refused to hear: "Dear God, please make him leave me alone."

Cleoparton

Not all eyes are on Dolly
when ten muscle-bound men in gold
loincloths carry her litter with asp arm

rests through Dollywood. White linen
with a jeweled shawl and ochre stenciled in
diamond bites on her cheek draw card
riffle shutter clicks. A fan of blue

ostrich feathers commands her gleaming men
move faster. Halfway out the exit gate
a boy squeezes in, hand up, and Dolly leans

down, beads in her straight Egyptian
hair swinging, for a quick, careful palm press.

For Kristina

all is not fair
in love
in war
fought thousands of
nights of worries
away
from knowing
where he is
how he is
if he is

as eyes that
captivated you
must look
over shoulders
your hands rested upon
as you danced
to music
now unfamiliar
to ears
grown accustomed
to gunfire

i consider
the bravery
the strength
the prayers said
every second of
every day

i realize
it takes
someone

courageous
to love
but
someone
fearless
to love
a soldier

Speak Now

they fill the room
like a crescendo of music
in the midst of silence
i find myself unable to speak

i see sadness in the way
some stare at me
some barely glance my way
afraid that i will speak

yet i am quiet
for i know that
there is no more to be said
i have spoken all that i will speak

but given the chance
i would bid more farewells
express more thanks and love
that i never did speak
that i never will speak

* * * *

they leave the room
like the fading scent of life
in a cold bed
i hear them speak
generously
of who i was
and i regret where i am

Blue Doors

Dark sea waves crash down upon my lips
sucking in the salty air.

Bright green eyes shine brightly from the lighthouse
guiding unknown ships to the shore.

Blue doors on a lonely beach
stand leading to the middle of everywhere.

A single port stands empty in the water
waiting for the perfect ship.

Deep winds blow across the sand
and the only sound is that of
crashing waves and swinging doors.

At My Easel

If I could paint your cancer
it would be gentle
in the greens of moss,
yellows of butter. I'd
use weak pigments
diluted in oily suspensions,
then dab them in a narrow field.
I'd encapsulate it with thick
black walls, not gates
with swinging doors
ornamented with gilt
and filigree. Then, if
I were still uneasy,
I'd either whitewash
the chaos or pour solvent
until the tumor ran like rain
and dried to a memory.

The Lemming

A long time ago
before I had lived,
I read about lemmings.
Every so often
a number of them
travel to the edge of a cliff
and jump into the sea,
plunging to their deaths.
I used to wonder why.
Then one night I had a dream.
I met a lemming,
and I said,
“I have wondered about you
for a long time.
Can you give me the reason
why you lemmings go by the hundreds
and jump to your deaths?”
The lemming paused a moment,
his eyes full of sapience
I could not understand.
Then he spoke,
asking simply,
“Can you give me the reason
why you humans don’t?”

I couldn’t.

Preserver

*The mound of human heads disappears into the distance.
I will rise to say: The sun. — Osip Mandelshtam*

You, if you are one of literature's native bearers,
Should memorize a poem by Mandelshtam.
I will take the mound of human heads.
Los desaparecidos have merged their candle with your candle,
And bequeathed their strength to you,
That you should make it shine to the best of your ability.
A wicked century's wisdom to its daughter:
If you try a new form of government, do not kill a lot of people.
If you keep an old form of government, do not kill a lot of people.

The Clock

The organ at the old First Baptist Church was centered on the wall at the rear of the choir loft, immediately behind the pulpit, wide brass pipes stretching almost to the ceiling behind it. My mother told me those pipes weren't real, that the ones that made the music were hidden behind them, that what we saw was only for looks. Richard Ellis, the preacher's son—who I usually sat with on the second row—said that wasn't so, but I knew it was. Mama was the organist.

Immediately after finishing the offertory on Sunday mornings—typically something long and dreary by Bach—she would slide off the elevated organ bench and take the seat the basses had saved for her. After giving me a stern look to make sure my mind wasn't manufacturing some kind of mischief, or beginning to wander otherwise, she would angle the clock she kept beside the triple-decker keyboards toward her as she settled down to listen to the sermon.

It was an alarm clock, but as far as I knew it had never been set to ring. Mama only bought it because it was cheaper than a wrist watch. She needed to know when the sermon was about to end so she could be ready to climb back on the bench when Reverend Ellis began the short prayer before the invitational hymn. You had to peep during the prayer to know exactly how that worked out.

I always had to pay close attention to make sure Richard didn't get me in trouble. We played a game on Sunday nights with the hymn books, just when the sermon seemed it might drag on forever. It involved turning pages and whispering, adding "between the sheets" to the names of the hymns. Try it sometime. You'll die laughing. Songs like Have Thine Own Way, Lord, "between the sheets," or He Leadeth Me, "between the sheets," even Rock of Ages! Then we would go back and add "between the sheets" to the first line of every song. The Battle Hymn of the Republic was in the back of the book. Think about it. Mine eyes have seen the

glory of the coming of the Lord . . . Anyway, you get the idea. Richard and I got to giggling so bad one night that Reverend Ellis stopped the sermon to shake a long finger at us. We still had fun, though, mainly with certain hymns. Richard's dad couldn't tell that while the congregation was singing the words, "the consecrated cross I'd bear," Richard and I were singing, as loud as we could, "the constipated cross-eyed bear."

Daddy sang in the choir, making it doubly hard for me to cut up during the services. It put me as much on the spot as Richard. Daddy was even the choir director for a couple of years, after one of the deacons caught Harry Blount, the real choir director, one time in Chicago, doing something in a hotel room with another man. You can't believe the trouble that stirred up at First Baptist.

One Sunday night that alarm clock went off right smack in the middle of the service. I couldn't believe how loud it was. It just went crazy—ringing, rattling and clattering, like it was trying to wake up somebody the sermon had put to sleep, or warn that there was a fire somewhere. Even Reverend Ellis turned around to see what was happening. My mother's face went the shade of a beet as she snatched it up and began fiddling with the dials on back as the noise seemed to get louder and louder. Richard and I knew it was all right to snicker a little because old man Pickler, the guy who always sat behind us, was about to crack up. Finally Mama handed the clock to the bald-headed man beside her, but he couldn't make it stop either.

Richard was laughing so hard by now that tears were running down his face. "They can't stop it," he whispered. "The alarm lever ain't there anymore." He seemed more certain of that than he should have been.

The bald-headed man handed the clock to Mr. Nettles, who looked at it like he wanted to squeeze it to death, then passed it to the fat guy beside him, who shook it once then handed it on down the line of basses, all the way to Daddy at the end of the row.

By then Daddy had figured out what to do. He wasn't about to fool around with the back of the clock or even shake it. He was up and running immediately, like he was an anchor man, clutching that clock like a baton on the final leg of a sprint relay. He was down the stairs outside the choir loft in no time flat, carrying that sound with him, then along the hallway toward the side door of the church. The sound of the alarm had toned down some

by then but it was still loud enough for everybody to hear it. Only when he started down the street behind the church did it gradually begin to fade out, making everybody in the congregation have to strain to listen, wondering if it would ever stop. The noise didn't go away completely until Daddy lobbed the clock over the stone wall outside the graveyard at the Methodist Church down the block. It wouldn't bother anybody there. There were only ghosts in that graveyard, and all the Methodists were home watching Red Skelton on TV.

Reverend Ellis didn't say a word. He only grinned as the congregation finally began to laugh out loud. It was the most fun any of us Baptists had ever had in church. The Lord had to be pleased. Reverend Ellis didn't look so pleased, though, as he stared down at Richard. I knew Richard was studying on how to get home and between the sheets before his daddy got there.

Before It Passes

Please
Hear me out
Just one more time
Let my thoughts settle into words
from a shout to an explanation
Calm these bruising fisted glares
and look into the window pane
of the hovel I once kept
for you in my heart

No balm will soothe your wounds, I know
pulled open with careless comebacks
It's too late to smooth the wrinkles
in your forehead where your auburn bangs rest
casually tucked behind your ears with simple care
What I'm trying to say before it passes
the point that nothing more can be said
is that I hope you will one day
look back on this and find
a way to forgive me
I am sorry

Illumination, To Everything Turn

Light is given out in unequal measures,
doled out hastily and without favor.

It is taken back sometimes just as quickly
as the setting sun or a final breath.

It screams through morning curtains,
cold, hungry, and wanting to be held,
sings with the sweetness of a mother's caress,
and dances from windowsill to front porch steps.

The warm air holds its reflected glow,
sunning bicycles in the front yard,
burns red as a scraped-knee afternoon,
as driveway stones sweat in the humidity.

Serendipity is the cool kiss of evening,
while amber rays wink around tree branches.
It sifts through rusty back porch screens, and rests
with content like old lacquer on ladder-back chairs.

But the rising moon has a sad green glow,
shining through door cracks with a wave of dismay.
It washes cold around the footboard with deference,
and as the tide retreats back from where it came,
it settles on the skin like a froth of quilted lead.

One Last Word In

Oh God, don't let this slip away from me.
Give me a sign, anything...
Let him say my name in his next sentence.
He is so beautiful—look at his eyes.
His pupils are small windows into his world, the world I don't understand,
Those threatening eyes never expand to share, never giving me that little satisfaction.
A true man of mystery is whom I fell in love with.
The way he rubs his long narrow fingers through his short blond hair.
He sits so still and straight, quiet and alone.
I love him and only him.
God, please don't let this be over.
God, please give me a sign, just my name before his next pause to start a new sentence.
God, please don't let me send the rest of my years without him.
His mouth is cracked.
The words are right here.
Thoughts in his mind have cleared into all that is left.
Words are the last option now.
Please, God, just my name! Just say my name!
“Goodbye Paula.”

Sahara

Women need water & wells,
spend all day wandering barren

landscapes looking for either.
Buckets on heads & carried

on high, hoping. The Peace
Corps built a top notch well

in Ndiayene but it's empty
for lack of rain. This is global

warming. This the women learn
at a day's cost—thirst & dirt.

hunger & thirst. It's actually
called the Sahel, this place

where the desert is migrating
in, uninvited. It's called

desertification, a mouthful
but painful to swallow, dry,

this creeping across, this
cleaving to, this changing of

everything, this relentless
& rootless, enduring drift.

My Grandfather Tells Me a Story About His Life

Ruby dyed her hair red until the last few years
when she couldn't remember to do it, he says,

tentative & soft, as not to startle my own
memories of my grandmother. But at the end,

he continues, perhaps the mind only remembers
itself as it wants, anyway: she at her most exquisite

red-headed self. The mind releases the body
from its humanness, this marvelous weight,

at some point—beauty is, time flies as it never
moves, the larger landscape is the roadmap

of the soul. At night, he says, I sleep with it all—
we drive along the countryside, red earth, red

dirt, opal skies, broken hills, passing by all
the things we've loved in this world.

The Potter

the warm ochre mug fits
into his rough-hewn hands –
molding perfectly
to the hands that made it.

as its lip touches his
his glasses frost with
coffee-laden steam.

the translucence trickles
and melts away
revealing worn eyes
the color of his favorite blue jeans.

pale tan dust is pressed into – grown into
his sleeves, his face, the legs of his jeans,
his crevassed fingers and palms.

a haze of gold dust – clay dust
twinkles in the yellow square of light
pouring through thick-paned windows
set deep in the woodbeam walls.

his squared thumb
strokes the clay lip,
memorizing.

long worktables shelf from the walls
time-sanded planks glowing

his stool grows upward from the clay dust,
worn smooth
fitted to his weight.

among the clutter of
broken shards
aging tools
sawdust
he sits creator

yet somehow created
from the elemental
wood, clay, iron, water
all is one

and the coffee steams gold
in the early morning sunlight.

Conundrum

to M.C. Escher

Lines
Curve into a square,
Endless,
But without beginning.

Geometrics;
Run riotous
Order
Over page, out of pen.

Perspective
Shifts and wavers
On still pages.
Water falls up.

Parallel
Flights of steps
Rise and fall;
Up the down staircase.

Two dimensions
Claw
Crawling off the page.
Out of the mirror.

Which face of the stairs is up?
Does the creature move on the page?
Can water fall up?
What is organized chaos?

The intrigue of puzzle is ambiguity.

God in the Pines

It amazes me how some days past will stick out in my mind, while others disappears—float away like fluffy dandelion heads on the gentle wind. On a warm summer night I'll leave the windows open and let the fragrant breeze stir up the dust of my memory. I try to recall things I thought I'd never forget. Lying back in bed, covered in my dark blue, jersey knit sheets, I close my eyes to find my childhood somewhere on a shelf, covered in dust. It plays like a reel-to-reel film on the backs of my eyelids. There are those certain frames of the picture that I know will be blank. Those memories that refuse to materialize into tangible, believable images in my brain.

I can't remember the day my brother was born, but according to my mother I wanted a pony instead. I can't remember the names or faces of my kindergarten teachers, but I remember my first pair of ballet slippers and the feeling of running my fingers on the front door of my childhood home in Statesville. I remember those pine resin scars—the ones left from our first "real" Christmas tree not wanting to fit in the door—I can feel them scrape against my fingertips to this day. But I can't remember what my first room looked like, or what my favorite song was, or the way my mom smelled in the morning at breakfast. Those memories are forever gone—lost to whatever monster that lived under my bed and gobbled them up in the dead of night. But no matter where I go, no matter what life finds me doing, I have one summer afternoon that sits on my shoulders with heavy defiance. There was one place where my world shattered like imperfect glass. One that refuses to be lost and rejects being forgotten.

When I was ten years old my parents had bought a large tract of land. I climbed out of the car and looked at my mom and dad like a small child examines a bug before squashing it with disdain. The first impressions this place made were enough to make me question their abilities to govern our household. This had to be the most ornery, untamable land—so full of ravines and undergrowth that even the pioneers had left I alone to its own unruly hatefulness. Of course, my father decided to build our new house

here. Leaving my old home, with my lavender unicorn wall borders and specially made bookcase, yet again to follow my father to "new land," and a promise of a bigger and better home, was nothing out of the ordinary. I wondered how long this place would hold his interest. Mom seemed to trail blindly behind, though I was the only one who noticed her crying as we packed up our china sets and matching glassware in her recently finished, perfect country-blue kitchen.

But I decided to do what my father said and give the place a chance. Turned out into the wilderness to find solace for my aching heart, lonely for my room and neighborhood playmates left behind, I looked for a brighter side. I discovered the one thing man had been searching for in all his years of wandering the earth, and I found it on one of my usual walks through the woods. If I turned my head just right, when the sunlight filtered through the pine boughs in the early morning, I could see God and heaven all at the same time. Of course, no one else could see it, so I didn't bother to bring it up. But something flowed through me here; energy filled me with uncommon strength and it came directly from the land itself. A time would come when I would have to push my fingers into the earth and suck up all the power I could, only to collapse into the embrace of the red dirt and green mosses and scream into pillow ferns at unnamed demons.

But for now, I could not see the usefulness of being so in touch with my surroundings. I was only a child. I would traverse the woods, carving my initials deep into the gray skins of birch trees with my grandpa's old Swiss and singing nonsense to the birds that observed me from a safe distance. The woods were a welcomed refuge to my spirit that had been thrown to the four winds for so long. Years of moving from one home to another had left me with a sense of shiftlessness. There was no place like home, because there was no such place. The family portraits hanging on the walls looked like someone else's family. The house was so beautiful, so boastful of our success and our happy family, yet so empty and devoid. At our church, people would tell me how lucky I was to have such a wonderful family. They didn't hear the arguing in the car rides home, or feel terrified at night that someone would snap and finally move away. The looming dark hung over me bed like an ominous cloud, foretelling the obvious to a girl who'd rather be deaf and blind to her family's problems. Everyday life was as suffocating as the god days of summer, even when there

were no fights. I'd rather have slept outside most nights and would when the weather allowed. The land held sway over me like no other place, and it was where I ran for comfort—here I could finally take root.

My woods were not lovely, nor were they dark or deep as Frost would have wanted them to be, but they were all mine. I had special nooks everywhere. At the edge of the woods was a field that opened up towards the main road. There was the sitting tree. It had a large branch that years ago had been struck by lightning. It grew crooked, like a large, natural bench growing right out of the living tree. Here I would sit and bathe my Indian skin in the golden rays of the setting summer sun or read poetry to squirrels. They preferred mystery stories, but I felt they needed more culture. The field was always bustling with some kind of life. When the wild wheat would get taller than I could see over, I knew the animals would retreat back into the safety of the woods. That always meant autumn would come soon. Pudgy groundhogs, fat from lazing under my sitting tree all season, quails and their children scurrying around, and millions of rabbits from the previous spring's "twitter-pating"—all of them rustling around in the weeds, oblivious to my presence. Hours passed on that tree branch so quickly that I had to be careful. Before I'd know it the hoot owls and the mockingbirds were calling me back home. The mockingbirds, reminding me of the last place I wanted to be; the hoot owls foreboding the coming night. The sitting tree was a precipice I perched on between two worlds. It separated the woods from the outer field—my world from the rest.

Years began to pass us by, and we made our mark on the land like I marked the birches—tamed it so that it didn't look so wild all over, just in certain parts. Covering it like everything else; hiding the ugliness like we did in the house with a fresh coat of paint or new window treatment. The gray gravel would crunch underfoot as I'd make my way back into the cool safety of the pine tree sentinels, guarding my path to the porch. The porch was the second best place on the land, after the sitting tree. The porch was my favorite place in the house because it wasn't in the house. It was almost like it wasn't a part of the house at all, and I preferred it that way. Hot days would lead to hotter arguments inside, and the anger would swell up and choke me until I'd have to escape. The summer heat would expel the yellow sap and resin, and it would seep out of the pine boards on the outside of the house. Hate seemed to ooze

out with it. The pine always smelled strong on the hot days and even more pungent during the “bad days”—that’s what my younger brother and I silently named those times. Times when life revolved around how the latest fight would end, and we would both sit and listen with baited breath, holding on to the hope that life wouldn’t stop today. Most times I couldn’t look into those heartrending blue eyes, hear the oppressive silence from downstairs, and not want to take him away. Run far from the hurt that would pour out liquidly, landing on the perfectly buffed white pine floors. I’d creep down the stairs and stand behind my dad’s chair, waiting for him to speak to me. Waiting for some comforting words that would let me know I wasn’t to blame. The gold announcer’s voice from the TV was more familiar than his. I’d wait all day, all night, all year—nothing would take the pain of that deadly quiet as I waited for a thousand years behind that dark green Lazy Boy for just one word from him. I died so many times there in the living room, behind his recliner, behind the turned back that wouldn’t acknowledge our secret pain. So I’d take that pain—the liquid pain upstairs on the hardwood floor, the angry, silent pain stirred into the dark iced tea, the deadly pain lying behind Dad’s chair—I’d take it and slip out of the sickly sweet death towards the open world where it could be beaten to death by a passing butterfly’s wings and disappear.

The porch didn’t have a swing, which was its only fault. The solid oak rocking chairs served fine in its absence though. Their rhythmic creaking soothed troubled minds and their steady backs held up emotional baggage so you could have a rest for a few precious moments. Sitting on the porch made the goings-on of the inside house disappear. If I looked through one of the windows to the inside, I could watch my life play in front of me like a bad movie. I couldn’t control the picture show then either. But the porch was a sanctuary without closing me off to the comfort of the woods. Here I could have civilization and raw nature. The whip-poorwills and robins would call to one another, and the smell of bleached laundry hanging on the lines at the side of the house would waft past my nostrils to remind me that I was still here on earth. Sunlight warmed my toes that gripped the edge of the railing, where my feet were propped up to make a writing desk from tanned legs. A large yellow cat—my soul mate—would sit and play Russian roulette with his tail and the bottom of the slow moving rocking chair. On the “better days” Dad’s music could be heard from the living room, or on the occasion he’d join me and sit as far

away as possible—on the opposite side of the porch—strumming his guitar or plucking his rusty banjo. Twangy bluegrass when he was really happy, that song he wrote—years ago for my mother—when he felt guilty. He'd always look at me when he sang the one line—you don't have to say it's over; I can see it in your eyes. He hardly ever looked, really look in my eyes by that time; I doubt he knew what color they were. Something about the way I looked at him made him distance himself, far enough away until my eyes became two dark openings like anyone else's. In springtime, I'd strain to hear Mom's sweet voice float high above the rest of us through the open windows, too beautiful to be anything less than divine. The melody would run out of her mouth like honey, but the bitterness of the words would bring a large swell to my throat. I'd beat the lump down with sweet tea and join in with my own haunting harmony. These sounds are the ones that I struggle to recall years later, and those that I wanted to forget so desperately still disturb my dreams.

That one summer afternoon, when the taste of salt tears and ball field dust mingled on my tongue, will always stay with me. The summer was almost over, and the final game of our local softball league tournaments had finished was well. Little did I know that something else would be ending before the sun's red-orange glow would spread over the porch. I remember my father sitting so far away as possible—on the other side of the ball field from my mother and me. No words were spoken. Even the usually raucous crowds of sweaty kids and over-zealous parents screaming and cheering at their favorite teams seemed deadly quiet and still. When the game ended, the separation had already begun. My brother went with Dad, I went with Mom. We didn't speak as we walked to the car. We didn't speak the entire drive home. We didn't sing either. The one thing we could always do together—no matter how much we hated, loved, or hurt at the time, we could always sing. I wanted to jump out of the window to escape my mother's silence. I tried to think of something to confess, to make her angry enough to scream at me, anything to bring noise into that small space.

Before the car was in park I bolted out of the door and onto the porch. I climbed into one of the rocking chairs and felt like it swallowed me entirely, as if I were a small child. I was thankful. I wanted to disappear into the oak; I wanted to become just another knot or knick in the wood. A dark spot, a blemish on the beautiful white pine. I didn't know if it was finally going to happen; I

wasn't sure what "it" was. But if "it" did, I would be where I felt safe. Mom walked by me as though I were as transparent as the air coming out my nostrils. She drew up the other rocker and just did it—released the pent-up emotions she had been holding in for so long. The dam was broken and I was left to deal with all the water that swept me away with it. The air was hot and heavy, and the heat made a deafening roar in my ear so loud that I couldn't understand what my mother was saying to me. She spoke a different language. I just stared into her eyes, wanting to cry and be completely devoid of emotions at the same time. Then the lightning hit and broke the tree all over again, this time for good. When Dad and Chris came home later, only one of them would be staying. I knew that our family had just died right there on the yellow pine planks of the porch.

I looked through the window to their bedroom and caught a glimpse of Dad's work shirt hanging on the door. I'd never smell him walk through the kitchen after working all day again—that familiar smell of sawdust and carpenter's chalk would disappear from the laundry room. His banjo sat in the corner, and I wondered if I'd ever be able to stand the sound of twanging strings again. I rushed away from the shattering noise that filled my head. All the questions had been answered, and my mother had barely spoken a word. I ran past the trees that failed to protect me, past the hiding places, past the false feelings of security and happiness. I sank to the earth and cried the tears that my family couldn't cry. I beat my father's chest in the dirt and twigs and screamed all the words my mother never could. I asked the questions from those loving, distressing blue eyes that my brother was too afraid to ask my father. I swallowed my own sorrow to pick up their burdens and carry them on my shoulders. I died to my father again, far away from his damned Lazy Boy and the perfect floors. This time in the red earth and the green mosses, where I could dig a grave. I went to sleep on the pillow ferns. I drew from the earth the strength to bear their pain—I buried my own under the sitting tree that had broken under the weight of my heart.

When I would sit on the porch after that day, I wouldn't hear the sound of his soft guitar strumming and his high tenor voice singing. I wouldn't hear golf announcers on the TV coming through the living room window, something I thought I'd never miss—and I wouldn't hear my father's voice cut angrily through the air, or his musical laugh dance in the darkness of night on the porch. I would-

n't hear all the lies he'd tell me. I didn't have to die anymore. I left the land, but my sorrows followed me. They refused to be buried there. My perfect father was gone, and I wished he had died. At least that way I would have kept his pristine image intact. At least then my sorrows could have been buried with him—his body would have weighed them down so they couldn't bleed to the surface, evaporate, and rain down on me again and again. I think on it now and my heart still sinks away. I stirred my sweet tea and found the lump from my throat floating on top like a stubborn cube of ice. The wind ruffled the country curtains in my parents' bedroom and blew a clean breath into the stale house. A tear rolled into the corner of my mouth and over my tongue, bringing the taste of ball field dirt and pine resin to my lips. I turned my head just right and looked up into the trees to see God and heaven and to find an answer to the whys running around in my heart. But it late afternoon, the sun was setting, and only twilight's dark fingers could be seen creeping up over the quiet trees, watching.

Poem Town

Each letter is a townhouse,
Or a storefront. Each sentence
Is one city block. Each space
In-between is a street. A street
Like the one you grew up on.
Each period is a fire hydrant,
And two explanation points,
Side by side, are the doors to your house.
On the corner of your block!!

Clearance

Glenda Ricci's back, a bold, black hypotenuse,
cliffs in a precipice of gray cambric buttocks.
I know it's her. I've seen her gimcrack Buick,

trunk mouth open, next to the curb.
Among the grabbers – swift Lilliputians
scampering for gems – she is the one

I stare down in discernment. Past Sundays,
we'd talked teens, SAT scores, proms, spring.
She'd asked about the jonquils on the sill.

Stooping, she now fingers my first edition copy
of *The Bluest Eye*, skimming the evicted morsel
right there in the yard – cover, binding and print.

Her eyes rummage the waif of appliances,
limp shoelaces, fractured dishes, busted boxes:
torn hefty bags of homeless artifacts.

She never looks up from my ousted things.
In the grass, the spine of a shelf once mine
lies cracked. Glenda, a flank of novels,

hatches from the splinters home.

Farm Field Trip

Several days passed before I understood
his pantomime of a man pulling—

Milk, I supposed,
from engorged teats. Or a heifer
tugged unwillingly into a stall.

—the chain wrapped around spindly legs,
the bloodied calf entering the world by force
to the sudden, wearied relief of the cow.

The dank smell
of the barn and the difficult, dramatic birth
recounted by your classmates, the clamor of
their voices rising around us like flies.

Roughhousing After News of Another Abduction

The weekend begins and my three boys
stay up late to tussle in the middle of our bed.
Fighting with arm locks & pillows,
they end up pinned again and again,
struggling against their father's grip.

Teach them, I ask, to get away.
He lines them in a row to demonstrate-
Elbows are the hardest part of the body.
Five pounds pressure applied to an ear
will leave an assailant bleeding.

When his palms slap the wall
of my oldest son's chest, he gasps.
My middle son drops to the ground.
the youngest cries, clings to me.
The lesson abruptly over— I tousle hair.
Against this world, we are no match.

Perfect Crime

Standing before the Amish wedding quilt
I see tiny blue stitches connecting to hands
that also preserve sun-blessed tomatoes
on a simmery afternoon.

The quilter-cook
whose damp collar chafes her sturdy neck
has been deflected just now
by the mute pleadings of a voiceless child
whose auburn curls fall chaotically
onto his denim shirt.

The quilt remains whole
on the south museum wall
while I steal away
undetected
with bits of red and blue fabric
concealed in my imaginings.

The Restoration Project

I try to measure the distance with a ruler and a broken pencil.

This is what I decide:

There is no misfortune like negligence
It's time to replace the sand's slipping dunes.

Everyone knows it's easier to work alone,
but I learned that working alone is

DANGER

more dangerous than never beginning.

Memories are washed in with the tide, tumbled trash and sea glass.

I forgot the natural rhyme that shaped my heart to a desire

Unnamed, I watch it travel
like a cloud of tiny white gnats, blurring my vision as it becomes my focus.

This pool is deep and full of gentle sounds.

When I take shells in my hand,
they tickle, trying to hide in me like sand.

Suddenly, I throw them to the sea, where they belong.

What else can I do?

They are life, but not mine.

What else can I do?

I can't remember the number for eternity and
when I imagine what to say,

What else can I do?

I try the only word my tongue can form: please.

And then you,

you think because you found this place, hidden in the cove,
you are welcome.

But there are signs, clearly posted in black legal letters:

DANGER
Stay Of The Dunes
Restoration In Progress

You say the water is contained,
but it could drown you, drown us deeper than we perceive.
For when waves crash, they wash and break sand and shell and
all form that words can shape.
It's starting over with the same broken pieces
It's starting over.

Odes to be Written

Upon having a twitch
in my big toe.

Alas, there'll be no new
horizons, big guy.

Upon building a fence
for privacy.

Neighbor has a dog, three
cats and a bee hive.

Upon viewing my navel
in a mirror.

Sure and it's the center
of the universe.

Upon asking advice
from my Dad.

Never pick a fight with a
drunk bigger than you.

Upon gazing at a
blade of grass.

Countless worlds
alive in green.

Upon being visited
by a wee bird.

Short visit still 1/10
of his life.

Upon asking advice
from Dad 2.

Keep your brains
in your pants.

Upon meeting God
face to face.
Hope you are in a
very good mood.

Sunrise

color
i knew it well

yellow was my summer sun soaked dress
green a smell tart and wet
honey in my mouth was brown
and red the sound of jubilance

but the gift of sight surprises me
with a sunrise of color
that needs no explanation

Of Cookies and Rocks

It was hot, but not the kind of sticky hot I was used to – that kind only came from the southern United States. Thinking about that particular brand of hot made me very appreciative of the dry heat the country of Jordan offered a tourist. You could walk a mile and feel wonderfully cool and dry, even though the zero humidity had its downsides. For instance, should you walk that mile without drinking water or wearing SPF 50 sunscreen, you'd most likely collapse looking much like an overcooked hotdog.

It was in this heat, sitting inside a grand arena made first by the Nabataeans and then the Romans thousands of years ago, that I met two children who changed my life. I can't recall their names (try as I might), but I do recall their faces – in a way I recall my first best friend's face or the face of my first crush. My unconscious mind recognized the need to record their beautiful faces even if my conscious mind didn't.

When I met the girl and boy, my group – “tourists” we called ourselves, though we really weren't – had just sat down to eat our peanut butter sandwiches and drink our two liter bottles of water. We had traveled to Amman as a missions team, and we were taking a break in our work to visit one of the many historical sites in Jordan. As I was taking in the view that Petra offered, I noticed two children going back and forth in the amphitheater, a little girl about seven or eight, and a younger boy with her, probably five or six.

Before we had entered the road leading inside Petra – a path cut from the rocks called “the Siq” – we had been warned of the Bedouin merchants roaming around selling “special” rocks to tourists for a Dinar or more (a Dinar is equivalent to a \$1.50 here in the states). These were rocks that had unusual colors and surfaces that shimmered, usually available wherever you chose to walk in Petra if you were looking for one. We thought it was funny that tourists would actually fall for the scam and buy one. So when I saw the children were selling these rocks, I didn't approach them then because I didn't want to be caught up in the very scam we had

been laughing about earlier. I decided to just observe them for a while instead.

The little girl was quite pretty with smooth dark olive skin, and made even prettier by her big black eyes shining with a smile she almost always had. I knew she must have been roasting in her clothes, for she was wearing a jean jacket buttoned over a black shirt, with matching blue jeans. The two things that struck me most were the hat she was wearing over her headscarf – also jean – and her bare feet covered with dust. It was over one hundred degrees that day; I can only imagine how hot she must have been and how her feet must have hurt on the burning stone of the amphitheater.

The boy was dressed much the same way. Though he had no hat and no khaffiya – he was too young for the traditional Jordanian head covering for men – he was also barefoot and wearing a matching jacket-jean outfit; on the right chest pocket of his jacket was embroidered a bright red rose, which stood out on his small frame. He carried it well, and though he was quiet and smiled little, his eyes had so much expression that I could hardly meet them with my own.

I watched how they interacted with the other people there: there were French tourists next to us, and they smiled but their guide sternly waved the kids on; the other merchants competing for the attention of the gullible Europeans and Americans shooed them away in Arabic in such a fashion that made the French guide seem polite. All the while the girl and her companion walked quietly, smiling at the passersby as they showcased the stones on a dirty tray. Not one person had stopped to buy a rock.

After a few minutes I could no longer make myself sit silently, so I got up and made my way over to where she and the little boy were standing, near the steps of the arena watching people as they ate and drank. I knew very little Arabic, but the girl had spent enough time at the busy vacation spot to understand my words in English: How much? A Dinar? Enough?

She nodded and quickly replied yes, and I bought two rocks with purple and red streaks and glitter all over. After the exchange, I walked a few paces back towards my food when my heart panged and forced me to turn around. I motioned for her and her friend to follow me back to my backpack, and tried to look unthreatening as I reached into it to get them two packages of Chips Ahoy cookies. Though it took several tries to convince them in my

broken Arabic that they could have the cookies, that I was trying to give it to them for free, they finally took the bags with a very adult air of caution.

This lasted only a few seconds, however, as the next thing I knew the little girl was throwing me a grin and tearing open the package of cookies. While the girl munched on her own bag of Chips Ahoy, the boy had a more reserved reaction. For a moment I thought that he would do the same, because he gave me the only wholehearted smile we had during our entire interaction. But something must have made him stop and rethink, for he just tucked the cookies into his jacket, picked up the tray of rocks, and went back to work.

The girl and I spoke a little bit; she had better English skills than I had Arabic, and I learned that the boy was her playmate, and that his dad was poor and sick. She tried to tell me other things too, but she didn't know the words in my language and I just didn't understand hers. So we moved on to something that was universal: fun. I found very quickly that the little girl had a wonderful sense of humor, and I laughed when she took one of her rocks, scratched it against the stone, and made a reddish powder that she used to smear on my cheeks, my chin, even my eyes, giggling the whole time. This drew the boy back, and he shook his solemnity for a brief moment to join in the fun.

Not long later – a terribly short amount of time as far as I was concerned – it was time for my group to leave again. Once the girl realized that we were going, the child side of her left, and her face became much too old. She started asking for things, like a coke, some water, pointing to the boy, asking for a coke again. Though my group scoured their bags for extra things to give them, they knew it wasn't enough. She knew it wasn't enough. And so did I.

When we left I hung back from the group. My chest felt so heavy I thought I could drop, and I didn't want anyone to see how upset I was. I kept thinking, children shouldn't have to be barefoot. Children shouldn't have to be out all day in the sun working. Children shouldn't have to sell rocks.

It was that exact moment that I realized that I wanted to be a helpmate to children without shoes, to fathers who are poor and sick or to anyone that needed help and couldn't get it. I realized that America isn't the norm in the world. The blessing that I received by being born in America was a blessing I was obligated

to use and share with the many, many others who weren't. Not out of pity, or out of arrogance that I can fix every problem, but merely because I had the ability and responsibility to help. And even though I know it will probably never happen, I'd like to go back to Petra someday and repay the gifts those two little children gave me over cookies and rocks: a clarity of purpose and a knowledge of myself.

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